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RELIGION AND PARTY

THE motion, proposed and accepted in the House of Lords in July, that world politics be based on Christian principles, raises many questions about the working of our present Government. A noble lord, in the course of the debate, said we stood as a social democracy founded on Christian principles. But when we come to examine the facts about Christianity in this country, doubts rise inevitably: not only has this country bowed to a pagan force in its treatment of Poland and Yugoslavia, but also the majority of its citizens is pagan by persuasion or practice. Plenty of fervour and religious ardour remain, and a residue of Christian teaching has been retained in the country's religion; particularly do people still insist on the need for 'neighbourliness,' a water-logged survival of Christ's second command. But that does not make a Christian religion.

Man, indeed, is bound to have a religion of some sort, as he is bound to take breath and food to keep alive. Man has been made for a purpose, the fulfilment of which lies beyond his immediate grasp. He cannot satisfy himself, for he has been given, in his intellectual nature, an infinite capacity for truth and goodness, a capacity which in fact can be filled by the Good, by God alone. No man can for long satisfy himself on this planet; he is always moving on in search of something else, always crying for the moon. The goods he sees about

him are limited and quickly used up; he must always be a hunter, and in the chase he is in fact worshipping God. He may not recognize God, but as he careers along his life grasping at one thing after another in his insatiable desire, he is attesting his dependence upon God, proclaiming that nothing less than God can satisfy him. In this way the very wars and quarrels between us are witnessing to our dependence upon the Creator, and our inability to find him fully. St Augustine's cry, 'the heart is restless, till it rest in thee, O Lord,' echoes through the rowdy rush of modern life, it is heard in the crack of rifle-fire, and—yes—in the world-shaking crash of the atom bomb. The human heart unconsciously seeks God in all this restlessness, for nothing less can satisfy it. It was made for God, and without him the gnawing of unsatiated desire consumes it.

Many, however, have rejected God in rejecting Christianity. They do not always consciously refuse to acknowledge him, but they cease to practise any recognized form of religion. The only event on Sunday is the dinner; church-going is left to the few who still believe. Yet in trying to throw religion aside man abandons not religion but the God of Christianity. He changes his religion. For this vacuum in his very being must be filled by some object. Man, being by nature worshipful and religious, will necessarily worship something. Remove the proper object of his worship and he will train his adoration on to something else. Consequently the urge for sacrifice and devotion is placed by modern people into all sorts of material, sensual activities. The most palpable examples are the new religions springing from social creeds. These creeds were not at first recognized as religious because they were not heretical forms of Christianity, which until the 19th century was still the main framework even for new religions. Communism and Fascism are now understood to have secured the natural religious impulse of millions of men; and both have abandoned the principles of Christianity.

New religions are being founded nearer home than in Russia or Italy. In our own country such organizations as political parties tend in fact to supply a useful substitute for Christianity. Perhaps the numbers who have really given their allegiance to such forms of worship as 'Labour' or 'Conservatism' are comparatively small, for the Englishman does not take so fervently to politics as the continental citizen. But their effect is felt everywhere because they do in fact 'run' the country. For those who have ceased to worship God the platforms of Labour, Communism or the other forms of Socialism provide convenient altars round which they may gather in adoration of the nation's new deities. But this change of religion has necessarily changed the whole party system of earlier generations.

When the country was Christian the religious enthusiasm of the people tended in one direction no matter to what party they belonged. The citizens worshipped God the Father and accepted the principles of Christ's teaching, and in these fundamentals it did not matter whether they were Whig or Tory. Fervour for justice or the relief of the poor could be found in both camps, and it was the same Christian fervour. Both parties used the same Prayer Book and worshipped the same God. Many may have been remiss in their religious duties; nevertheless the party system was built upon the understanding that all members of every party had the basic principles of Christianity firmly beneath them as the one common ground. In general they sought the same God; they followed the same ritual and sacrifices to quieten the restlessness of their natures. Where there was no common ground of religion, as in Ireland, the party system could not work. The division in religious allegiance produced a political division which prevented any co-operation in directing the state. Where the parties are religious parties there is no opportunity for a single whole to be made of them. Short of apostasy every member is bound to follow the political tenets and programmes of the group to which he has given his allegiance.

There are sects today like Jehovah's Witnesses who consciously unite political and religious ideals in one system, regarding the 'Kingdom of God' as of the same nature as the kingdoms of this world; and they look for its triumph as a triumph over the other kingdoms, its rivals. Communists too look upon the kingdom of Marx, a world-wide kingdom to which they give their all, as the successful rival of all other kingdoms. In such systems there is no room for 'parties.' Criticism or disagreement is heresy and immoral and it is met by excommunication and possibly also by an *auto da fé*. These are conscious religions and the more dangerous for that in their totalitarian brutality.

But now that we no longer have a Christian society and natural religious fervour has begun to find expression in politics, the party system will break down and totalitarianism creep into its place. Religious fervour and enthusiasm is concentrated in the Party and there is no basic common ground on which all may worship together. The voting of members at debates becomes a useless formalism, for every motion put forward by a Labour government is an article of the Labour creed and the member who refuses to support it becomes an apostate. A government with an absolute majority of its very nature becomes totalitarian and dictatorial. Every motion of censure is turned down with pious zeal by the votaries of the religion in power. Party discipline and loyalty are needed; but they should not imply a blind faith and submission to a complete authoritarianism.

This means that political disagreement is religious disagreement, so that in fact religious wars rage through countries that call themselves democratic and tolerant yet lack the common purpose of Christianity. There should have been nothing surprising in Churchill's turning his power of invective from the vanquished German enemy to the new Labour foe when the country went to the polls. He was a prophet calling the people to worship in the temple of his lord and to go forth to the slaughter of the idolatrous servants of Baal. Elections naturally take on the character of religious struggles. The only fact that preserves any resemblance to the old party system has been the balance of power which can be established by the different parties in the various coalitions, arranged in opposition to some common enemy. A Parliament over which hover four or five powerful deities may preserve an outward semblance of common and self-critical action. The gods may be, between them, sufficiently evenly matched to be able to preserve themselves and their worshippers from being submerged. But the party division is a wound cleaving to the very marrow of the country's bones. The House of Commons bears now some resemblance to the Holy Place in Jerusalem where the different Christian religions and sects gather in their respective corners and alternate their worship with sallies against their heretical neighbours.

The pity of it is that every new social or political plan, however good or in so far as it is good and sound, is liable to set up another religion. For these programmes, which are indeed not the one true God, will become the object of the restless heart of man and provide him with a passing sense of fulfilment and satisfaction.

The practical difficulty for the believing Christian is grave. Catholics are often urged to play their part in politics by joining the party of their choice and playing an active and influential part therein. But they discover after a while that it is difficult to follow this advice because there are items in the programme of their party to which they cannot agree—education, private property or larger issues of justice. Yet they cannot be influential unless they support the programme as a whole and in all its parts. Little wonder they find the situation awkward, for they might as well try to play an influential part among the Baptists or the Quakers. They have in fact joined another religion; they are being asked to offer incense to new gods. To differ on the education policy or the housing scheme is to challenge one of the dogmas and to run the risk of excommunication. No doubt there are possibilities of compromise and the Catholic can worship sincerely at Mass on Sundays and play his part in the local Conservative club during the week without a false conscience. But because there is no common Christian basis to governmental policy, the Christians who

remain find it increasingly difficult not to turn their own politics into religion.

The motion in the House of Lords was the last echo of the old principles under which governments and parties ruled within the common frontiers of Christendom. It took the atom bomb to drag this cry for the old order from the House of Lords. Significantly the cry was not heard in the Commons, where the new religions have full powers. It was a demand that Christendom be re-born: it did not recognize that the light of true Christianity had faded in the chamber where the demand was made, had faded too in nearly every chamber of government in Europe.

THE EDITOR.

CHARITY ABOUNDING

IT is no doubt inevitable that the Holy See should have been unjustly condemned and wrongly praised by prejudiced or ill-informed people in this country and elsewhere, especially during the years of war and its aftermath. The Holy Father has been condemned when some word or action of his did not, or was deemed not to, conform to the ideology or bias of the critic, just as he has been praised according to an equally false norm of criticism. If he blessed a group of Catholics who happened to be Italians and soldiers, or expressed approbation of Catholics who happened to be Spanish, or condemned the intrinsic evil of an atheistic Communism propounded by men who happened to be Russians, he was dubbed fascist. If he gave succour to British prisoners of war, condemned the evil of Nazism as propounded by the Germans, or pleaded for the Jews persecuted by the totalitarian states, or welcomed to the Vatican the Allied Commanders and their troops, he was congratulated (grudgingly enough, it is true) on these presumed expressions of approval of the Allied cause.

It could hardly be expected that the run of mankind in this narrow, materialistic, selfish, modern world should appreciate the simple truth that the Holy Father both is and acts as the Vice-regent of Christ upon this earth; and that he has a peculiar obligation of paternity in regard to Catholics of all nations; that he has a God-given duty to proclaim to all men the basic principles of morality and to condemn in no uncertain voice, and without respect of persons, any blatant and general disregard of them; that he is bound to regard himself as the universal protector of those in need and the protagonist of justice for all mankind. In these days of windy talk about internationalism and world unity, it is perhaps too much to expect that the