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EDITORIAL

How far ought the Church to be politicised? Paul Ballard writes helpfully on this theme as one of the contributions to this *Quarterly*. Ever since E. R. Norman's Reith Lectures of 1978 *The Church and Social Order*, the issue has been increasingly to the fore. Till very recently, however, the discussion has been on a comparatively abstract level as far as the British churches have been concerned, owing a good deal to the interest being taken in 'liberation theology' emanating from Latin America, and to the stance adopted by the World Council of Churches in the struggle against racism. During 1980-81 the debate began to relate to certain major issues within Britain, notably unemployment, housing and inner-city deprivation. When even members of the Anglican hierarchy began to issue statements questioning the effects of government policy in these fields, some began to perceive a significant shift in the assumed role of the established Church vis-à-vis the state.

But it has been the past twelve months that have seen the most important developments. Allowance must of course be made for a certain journalistic interest in dramatizing situations.

Terms such as 'confrontation' and 'conflict' are difficult to exorcize once introduced. Nevertheless the Church of England in particular has incurred a degree of odium for apparently failing to give its blessing to what some consider to be normal and healthy patriotic sentiments. Earth tremors have spread from a proposed new version of the National Anthem. The insistence of the leaders of the Church of England, the Free Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, that the service in St Paul's Cathedral commemorating victory in the Falklands should carry an emphasis on penitence and reconciliation as well as thanksgiving, provoked some anger. It could well be that the service in fact tuned in to an underlying mood of the nation more than its political and journalistic critics appreciated.

Since then there has appeared *The Church and the Bomb*, the report of a working party of the Church of England Board of Social Responsibility. Its finding, that in the light of Christian moral tradition nuclear weapons are unacceptable and that Britain should give up its independent deterrent while remaining in NATO, itself received a pre-emptive strike from those who see the Church as having no say in such matters. What reaction, if any, there would have been had the report not taken a unilateralist line is an interesting question. Be that as it may, it is now clear that on a number of major issues significant numbers of clergy and laity in the established Church are openly questioning policies of Her Majesty's government.

Does this mark a major break with tradition, as some fear and others hope? Those with some historical awareness will wish to lengthen the perspective somewhat. They will point out that both before and after the Reformation the English Church has produced a number of meddling priests. They will point to the well-established Christian socialist tradition within the Church of England, dating from the mid-nineteenth century and, interestingly, at its strongest within the Anglo-Catholic movement. They will remind the forgetful that this century's most famous Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, dealt extensively with economic and social issues, with his paperback *Christianity and Social Order* achieving vast sales in war-time Britain. They will also recall the lonely but courageous voice of George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, condemning the strategic bombing policy against German civilian populations.

Nevertheless, it may be that a more general consciousness is now pervading the Church of England, that the formation of a Christian mind on contemporary issues need not take as an assumed priority the maintenance of the *status quo*. The old jibe about the Church of England being the Tory Party at prayer no longer carries. In fact the former religious-political alliances have been in process of disintegration for many years, as nonconformists know very well in their own case, particularly since the demise of the Liberal Party after the First World War. From one aspect, it is simply part of the steady emergence of an increasingly secularized and pluralistic society.

This makes it all the more important for Christians of all traditions to reflect more deeply on the relation between their belief in a God who has made himself known in history, and their understanding of what is happening in history today. It is to this basic issue that Paul Ballard's article is addressed, and readers will note that he does not avoid the fact that at both national and local congregational levels Christians will be debating with each other as well as with the world at large.

A situation in which the Church of England appears more ready to adopt a line independent of the 'establishment' will inevitably prompt nonconformists to reflect on their own historical experience of dissent, and perhaps even to suggest that from this experience they have something useful to contribute. It certainly is necessary to repeat again and again that one of the most vital streams of Christianity which has energized many British people for more than three centuries, and which has profoundly shaped their culture in many ways, has been independent of state patronage, and at times actually disowned if not persecuted by the state. When it comes to active protest against state policy, Baptists particularly will want to cite the campaign of passive resistance against payment of rates for church schools early this century. Such an instance, however, may also provide a warning. It marked the apogee of militant dissent in its alliance with the Liberal Party. In its context it was an important and worthy issue. But that campaign did not finally achieve its objectives, despite all the passion and sacrifice which went into it. And strangely, once the campaign disappeared into the wings, little else seemed to occupy the public stage for dissent. Apart from the question of conscientious objection during the First World War, the principle of liberty of conscience offered little scope as a rallying-point. It seemed as though with all the attention focussed on a single issue, what was happening at wider and deeper levels in society was missed. Beneath the fervour of protest, it emerged that Baptists as a whole had little in the way of a theologically based understanding of society. Protest by itself cannot be a substitute for sustained thought which, as Karl Barth put it, holds the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in another.

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