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Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

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CHINESE TRAGEDY AND HOPE

THE great missionary withdrawal from China is an event charged with high dramatic significance. It seems to be part of the blasphemous answer returned by a divided world to the bold declaration of the divided Christian traditions at Amsterdam in 1948 of their intention "to stay together". In an age when separated Christians have been drawn nearer to one another through the ecumenical movement and the sin of disunity is being confessed with more feeling and sincerity than ever before, there is the prospect of a greater and more serious division than at any other time in the history of the Church. The division of the world into two mutually hostile blocks, East and West, Communist and non-Communist, is being accomplished with all the apparatus of a highly developed technical civilization. The free interchange of ideas, persons and even material assistance has been effectively stopped. Churches in one half of the world are being obliged to break their links with the World Council of Churches and to denounce the parent bodies as instruments of a dying social order which must be liquidated.

The Church in China under the new People's Government has been faced with this tragic dilemma. Its chances of survival and work would seem to be better if it repudiates in every way possible signs of dependence upon the West. An 'accusation-movement' has attempted to purge the Church of all imperialistic influence, yet no church which cuts itself off or allows itself to be severed from effective fellowship with the rest of Christendom can for long preserve the true order of a church. The Chinese Church can ill afford the loss of the help in money and in skilled leadership which it was receiving from Western missionary endeavour. Without this help, it will, for some time to come, inevitably be weaker and less able to fulfil its responsibilities to the Chinese people. The law of life in the Church of God is a mutual dependence of each member upon the others in a common activity of giving and receiving.

The Chinese tragedy is driving Western Christians to a renewed self-examination in missionary motives and methods. The Communist accusation preferred against missionaries and mission boards of being "running dogs of imperialism" is perhaps an exaggerated charge of a too great use of western methods and of unconscious but subtle forms of spiritual imperialism. A recent pamphlet by an anonymous author who writes with first hand knowledge of China, interpreted in the light of ecumenical work in Geneva and Germany, has defined with terrible clarity the experience and problems of Chinese Christians under Communist rule.¹ The possibilities and strict limits of a total Christian

¹ *Christian Witness in Communist China* by "Barnabas" (S.C.M. Press, 1951, pp. 79, 4/-).

witness in a totalitarian Communist state, the failure of much Christian effort in easier times to prepare the Church for the flood, and the extent and variety of Communist pressures upon the Church are set forth with sympathy and understanding. The careful reader is prompted to ask whether, in similar circumstances, the Church in this country, with its far greater resources, would be able to give any more decisive witness. This study of China is a profoundly important analysis of Communist ideology and methods in any land and points the way to a constructive Christian reaction to the challenge presented by Communist initiative. Even at the worst, "to a State authority with absolute pretensions, love itself is subversive". The question to ask is not, How far can the Church obey the new political power? but, How can it act in responsible obedience to the will of God even in this situation? "There is no society in which this question cannot be answered."¹

THE GOOD ORDER OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

THE history of the English people during the last few decades has been marked in an ever increasing measure with what Bishop Hensley Henson was in the habit of describing as a "disgust with every kind of authority".² This distaste for order and discipline which has borne so much evil fruit in the loosening of social obligation and the disintegration of family life, has been directed particularly against any sustained attempts at the strict maintenance of Christian standards of belief and conduct. The flouting of authority in Church and State alike has been approved by the unthinking huzzas of a multitude of sentimentalists, who have no greater desire than to be left undisturbed to enjoy themselves in their own way. If anyone, whether bishop or parish parson, should presume to invade this territory, from which they have been, at least implicitly, warned off, and in the name of Christ to demand an end to self-indulgence and slackness, the reaction of those who thus feel themselves reproached will be both vigorous and prompt. A variety of epithets lie at hand to be taken up and used with telling effect. Narrow-minded, spoil-sport, reactionary, puritan, dogmatic, sectarian, clerical, unloving, are among the words which can be employed in this way, and it requires a more than common degree of courage to withstand the emotional force which will be aroused on such occasions. The Church of England, even in its own domestic affairs, has been deeply infected by this temper, so that defiance of authority on many issues has all too often been a sure way to easy popularity. Clerical lawlessness has had an injurious effect upon the good order of the Church and hampered its witness to the nation in a period of upheaval and confusion.

It is evident that from the first the Christian Church has been obliged in the name of Christ to exercise discipline over its members and would-be members. Many of the reformers of the sixteenth century were appalled at the way in which medieval ecclesiastical discipline had become so perverted as to contribute to a decline in the conviction

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

² *Bishopric Papers*, p. 273; cf. pp. 181-82.

of sin as moral iniquity and to substitute for it offences against ecclesiastical law. But this did not lead them to ignore the necessity of discipline in the corporate life of the Church. Indeed, those who stood in the tradition of John Calvin regarded discipline as an essential note of the Church, to be set alongside the preaching of the Word and the due administration of the Sacraments. The considering student of the history of Christendom will nevertheless find himself obliged to admit that the record of every Christian tradition contains far too many examples of the improper use of discipline. Churchmen are no more free than other kinds of people from the corrupting influences which arise from the exercise of power over the lives of men and women. This deplorable ecclesiastical failure, with its incontrovertible evidence of the ways in which discipline has been perverted in the interests of a hierarchy, or particular parties and social classes¹ (as when leading churchmen of an earlier age conceived it their duty to impress upon the lower orders of society "the grand law of subordination") has contributed in no small degree to the modern resentment at any assumption of disciplinary authority by Christian leaders.

The importance of the subject at this stage in our affairs has been emphasized in a notable article in *Theology*² by the Rector of Elland, who presents his observations as a pastor, commissioned to be "the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of Christ" in the particular but limited area of an English parish. He remarks with justice that the contemporary use of the word *rigorist* is depreciatory; and endeavours to show that the object of the so-called rigorist in refusing to continue the indiscriminate offer of the sacraments and other occasional offices of the Church to all comers is the encouragement of all men within his reach to enter into the Church by the gate of conversion and baptism. He does not desire to reduce the Church to a faithful remnant, but he does intend to rescue the sacraments from degradation and the people from unthinking insincerity and irresponsible hypocrisy. "To do this well, to do it at all in present circumstances, he must be prepared from time to time to refuse or cast out the hypocrite." The indiscriminate use of the word '*rigorist*' as a label for those clergy who desire to administer the sacraments with due regard as well for rubrics as for their true meaning, can serve only to darken counsel. Christian ordinances can never be observed without some conditions and the minister is entitled to require the fulfilment of the conditions which the Church itself has specified; nor is he at liberty to vary those conditions without the deliberate sanction of authority. Yet many individual ministers in recent years have taken this authority upon themselves, possibly because the Church in its corporate capacity has given insufficient attention to these problems.

Few considering churchmen would be prepared to deny the scandals occasioned by the lapsed and the unbeliever demanding the right to participate on their own terms in the most solemn Christian ordinances. It is curious to reflect that Evangelicals, whose historic tradition should have led them to regard repentance and faith as the

¹ *History of Civilization* by G. E. Buckle, Vol. III, chap. iii.

² Vol. LV, No. 379 (Jan., 1952), pp. 2-10.

indispensable things "required of them who would come" to the font or to the holy table, are yet amongst those who are most reluctant to make any changes in prevailing patterns of pastoral activity, and show themselves deeply suspicious of any proposals for a strict observance even of such rules as already exist. It is, of course, certain that any attempt to restrict baptism or Christian marriage or Christian burial to those who have given some evidence of the reality of their membership in the Body of Christ would be met with a great volume of disapproval throughout the nation. Such action might easily bear the aspect of an indifference on the part of the Church to the well-being of any but its own active members and so confirm the widespread suspicion that Christians belong to a narrow, self-centred community that cares little for the sorrows and sufferings of the world. To confirm that impression by some overt action on the part of ecclesiastical authority would have an adverse effect on the discharge of its mission by the Church in the country. It would erect a formidable barrier between the Church and the masses which subsequent generations would experience the utmost difficulty in breaking down. There can be little dispute about this. What is not so clear is whether the injury would be so great as to outweigh the gain of a church once more striving to be obedient to its divine Head and proclaiming His searching demands upon all those who would be numbered amongst His disciples.¹ A church ready to bless in traditional ways those who want Christ without His cross, who want Christian ministrations not as the foundation but as the superficial adornment of a conventional mode of life, is an apostate church.

This controversy about pastoral objectives and methods, which is in process of dividing the clergy of the Church of England into two camps, resolves itself into a debate about the evangelistic opportunities of the occasional offices. It is true that birth, marriage and death are still in our mass society great occasions in the lives of the majority when the personal character of human existence becomes a felt reality. They may be occasions when the call of God addressed to persons can be presented by the pastor with a greater prospect of success than at most other times. But the 'rigorist' is entitled to ask whether the results achieved by the indiscriminate administration of these offices justify the inevitable softening of the high demands which these occasions do make upon men and women. Is there not great danger of the cult of opportunities being pursued at the expense of depth and seriousness in pastoral work? Are not many of those opportunities only opportunities in name, since the time available for contact is too brief to allow of that amount of pastoral care which could alone hold out the prospect of repentance and conversion? Is not the Church of England too deeply compromised by its national position to make any determined stand? Is it not too easily dissuaded from action which, though unpopular, is deeply Christian, by the suggestion that the consequent unpopularity will alienate people from Christ? Yet Christ never refrained from presenting His claim to unconditional surrender from would-be disciples for fear of losing their interest or support. The time is long overdue when the people of this country should be brought

¹ St. Luke ix. 57-62; St. Mark x. 17-22.

to realize that a Christian profession commits them to action and service far beyond the level which convention dictates. If it would be folly lightly to throw away the great store of goodwill to the Church that undoubtedly still remains even in unlikely quarters, it is pertinent to enquire whether these assets are not in fact liabilities, far more frequently than is commonly realized. Nevertheless, the difficulties are not all with the anti-rigorists. Those who live in a post-Christian era have not for their guidance the variety of precedents which can help those in a pre-Christian order. The Gospel text, "He that is not against us is on our part", has not yet lost its validity and the deputy of Christ even in a post-Christian epoch will ever be mindful of his duty not to quench the smoking flax. To draw a distinction between those who may be allowed Christian ordinances and those who must be refused will be extremely difficult and cannot be left to the discretion or indiscretion of the incumbent. It may easily promote the dangerous notion that sacraments and other ordinances are a reward for a certain standard of merit. The spread of such a notion would be difficult to counter and would portend an illimitable disaster for the Christian mission in this country. Much more research into the nature of the pastoral task in a post-Christian mass society is needed before any sure guidance can be given to individual pastors. In the meantime the debate must proceed with a quickened sense of the gravity of the issues involved.

THE SERVANT OF THE CHURCH

THE recent observance of so notable a milestone as the two hundred and fiftieth birthday of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel has directed attention once more to the place and function which a missionary society ought to have within the structure of the Church. The Church of England does not, after the fashion of some other communions, possess one missionary agency appointed officially by the Church itself, although there have not been wanting in recent years advocates of that measure. The great development of Anglican missionary work during the last century and a half has been the result of the endeavours of several different societies, officially recognized but brought into existence by voluntary action and retaining their own direct freedom of action. It is doubtful whether official action would ever be flexible enough for the pioneer work which missionary witness demands.

The S.P.G. has a different ethos from other Anglican missionary societies and apparently does not consider that it is called to undertake certain forms of pioneering activity. In the commemorative volume published to mark its great anniversary, the Society is defined as "the servant of the Church for its extension overseas, and its policy to seek the guidance of the Church's leaders".¹ In the choice of spheres of work the Society has never asked, "Where is a mission needed? What new territory ought we to invade?" It was founded to answer a call made from America through a Bishop of London. "And so it has always waited for invitations . . . through the Archbishop, or

¹ *Into All Lands*, by H. P. Thompson (S.P.C.K., 1951, 42/-), p. 714.

from bishops or church communities overseas." Its missionaries are passed by an official board of examiners with episcopal authority and they are regarded as missionaries of the Church and not of a society, being placed under the authority of the bishop of the diocese where they are to serve. Again, it has "not been drawn towards the experiments in social service, in rural and agricultural uplift, that some have proclaimed as new paths for evangelism".¹ It has, in fact, shared in the characteristics of the Church of England, slow to recognize the full range of its responsibility, slow to realize the importance of the industrial classes and their small gifts, slow to participate in inter-denominational activities. Within those limits it has fulfilled a great service, but its record demonstrates the need, in addition, for more flexible instruments of the Christian mission if the duty of pioneering is not to be overlaid.²

NO DESPERATE MEASURES

IS the peculiar status of the Church of England "as by law established" an anomalous survival from an earlier age which ought to be terminated with decency and despatch, or is it the embodiment of an important principle which ought to be preserved for the great benefits which it brings both to Church and State? Englishmen are not in the habit of making drastic breaches with their own historic past and the most considerable changes in constitutional procedure are normally carried through with a grave respect for precedent. The relationship of Church and State in England to-day is, in certain important respects, different from what it was in the seventeenth century, in the Napoleonic era or even in the opening days of this century, although its legal status remains substantially unchanged.

It cannot be denied that so close an association of spiritual and temporal authority presents many occasions of danger both to politicians and ecclesiastics. The Church which knows that its own existence and mission are independent of any recognition by the state, bears the chief responsibility for conducting a constant scrutiny as well of the terms as of the consequences of the relationship expressed in the phrase, "by law established". In the spring of 1949 the Church Assembly was persuaded to pass a resolution which recognized the value of the establishment, but claimed the need for changes in its present form, so that the Church might the better fulfil its responsibilities. It is probable that most churchmen—whether within or without the Assembly—are but little conscious of such formal impediments to the discharge of its duty by the Church. The commissioners who were appointed on the strength of this resolution have found themselves obliged to acknowledge this claim only as "a thesis for examination and not a governing assumption". Nevertheless, it is important that churchmen should not be suffered to assume complacently that all is well with the establishment, in the absence of open antagonism or sharp conflict.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 717.

² Cf. *Christian Partnership*, by Stephen Neill (S.C.M. Press, 1952, pp. 124, 7/6), pp. 35-6, 43.

The report¹ which the commissioners have presented is a document of considerable interest for its careful discussion of the arguments commonly urged on both sides on those aspects of the subject which are most controversial ; but it has no recommendation to offer which contemplates a major alteration in the present relationship. " We do not hold that ' establishment ' must be retained at any price. But, contemplating ' establishment ' as it exists in England to-day, we are more impressed by the opportunities than by the dangers."² The commissioners propose, what few reasonable persons would wish to deny, that authority should be given (along the lines of draft Canon XIII, and subject to adequate safeguards for good order) for optional and experimental use of deviations from the Prayer Book ; that in the appointment of bishops, the archbishops should, " if they think it desirable ", appoint a small representative council to assist them in the preparation of such advice as they may wish to give to the Prime Minister at the vacancy of any see, and that the ridiculous penalties of *praemunire* should be formally abolished ; and that a final court of appeal in ecclesiastical causes should be set up, composed of the two archbishops and two communicant members of the Church of England who hold or have held high judicial office. It is highly improbable that these proposals will arouse either a storm of opposition or satisfy those who make a doctrinaire demand for the liberty of the Church on the basis of general principles. They would suggest that by the slow development of custom and constitutional practice, a better form of relationship between Church and State is being worked out in England. It is to be noted that the commissioners themselves assert, " we prefer to rely on unwritten understanding rather than formal regulation ", an opinion which would seem to disallow the proposal that there should be a consultative council set up by the archbishops to advise formally on appointments, in place of the present informal consultation which, nevertheless, possesses the sanction of an established custom. The report goes on to say that " the establishment of the Church presupposes a mutual confidence between Church and State which flourishes most when not too precisely defined ". If this mutual confidence should be allowed to suffer irreparable damage in this generation, through ill-advised speech or by hasty action, lasting injury will have been done to the Christian good of England.

¹ *Church and State*. The report of a Commission appointed by the Church Assembly, June, 1949 (Church Information Board, 2/6), p. 1.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 68.