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CHRISTENDOMS, NEW OR OLD?

“HENCE the particular problem now before us, which can be formulated as follows: should a new Christendom, in the conditions of the historical age on which we are entering, while incarnating the *same* (analogical) principles, be conceived as belonging to an *essentially* (specifically) distinct type from that of the mediæval world?”

The question is posed on page 133 of the recently published English edition of Maritain's *Humanisme intégrale*.¹ In its context the “now before us” refers only to one stage—albeit a crucial stage—in the argument of that great book. But I would suggest that it has a far wider significance. For I think that this is *the* vital question which now confronts Christian social thought and action, a question which calls imperiously for a clear answer. For so long as we fail to answer it, or so long as we answer it contradictorily, our social efforts must lack unity of aim and direction. So long shall we be disastrously divided into muckers-in and muckers-out and muckers-along. So long will there be hostile and irreconcilable “schools of integration” and “schools of separation.” So long will the latter charge the former with compromise with the world and the flesh and with ignoring the devil, and the former regard the latter as escapist saboteurs. So long will there be “Right” Catholics who quite honestly doubt the sincerity of the Catholicity of their brethren on the “Left,” and so long will there be “Left” Catholics who only with difficulty can regard their brethren on the “Right” as deserving the name of Christian. So long must we be prepared to endure the hideous sight of Catholics ready literally to blow each other to pieces in “ideological” civil war in the name, respectively, of preserving a past, or creating a future, Christian civilisation.

¹ *True Humanism*, by Jacques Maritain, trans. by Margot Adamson. (Bles; 10s. 6d.)

It is surely no less a mark of highest wisdom to be able to ask the right questions than to be able to answer them. But this question of Maritain's is no less typical of the lucidity of his thought than it is, unhappily, of the obscurity of his language—to those at least who are unfamiliar with scholastic technicalities and his own sometimes rather individual use of words. To understand the full significance of this question one must have read and assimilated the 133 pages which precede it in this closely reasoned and logically constructed book.² We cannot summarise those 133 pages without impoverishing and indeed misrepresenting them. We would only draw attention to one dominating idea: the idea that “a sound social philosophy” cannot exist unless it be combined with “a sound philosophy of modern history”; that *Chrétienté*—a Christian social order—is not a unique, static, abstract, immutable idea to which we must conform regardless of historic processes and existing social, economic and political forms; that “if it is true that there is a sort of blasphemy against God's government of history in the desire to *return* to a past condition, if it is true that there is an organic process of growth in both the Church and the world, then the obligation imposes itself on Christians of saving the ‘humanist’ values which have been disfigured by four centuries of anthropocentric humanism . . . a total reconstruction of our cultural and temporal forms of life . . . their substantial transformation and a passage to a new age of civilisation.” (p. 64.) Maritain shows how that it is demanded by a right understanding of the Gospel message of the Kingdom of God that “it is the office of spiritual things to vivify the things of time. Christianity should inform, or better, interpenetrate the world.” The mission of Christianity is not to build an exclusive oasis of changeless Christian culture in the midst of but apart from history and

² The translation is admirable—we do not remember that Maritain has been served so well before by his translators. But we must deplore the fact that in the English edition the book was shorn of its analytical table of contents and is provided with no more than a bare list of chapter headings. This table is indispensable, not only for reference (and it is a book to which one should have constant occasion to refer), but also to indicate the plan and process of the argument.

actuality. Her mission is a universal one, to *all* men, as they exist in history and in fact. The Middle Ages created, or sought to create, such an all-embracing Christendom; a social order governed by Christian principles and right reason. That unity was smashed by anthropocentrism and schism. Are we then just to return to the Middle Ages? Are we to blot out the intervening four centuries as though they had never existed? Maritain answers with an emphatic No. It is not so much that we "cannot put the clock back." It is that we *may* not put the clock back. Or rather, we may not and cannot put the *calendar* back:

"Not only indeed do I recognise the fundamental irreversibility of the movement of history (in contradistinction to the pagan concept of eternal recurrence), but I believe it the stage of a drama at once human and divine, of which visible events are only the symbols; and that, borne on by this irresistible movement, humanity passes beneath varying historic skies, heterogeneous in type, which create specifically differing conditions of realisation for the principles of culture, and that the moral physiognomy of these skies differs much more profoundly than is commonly assumed.

" 'Suffering,' says Léon Bloy, 'passes away; *to have suffered* never passes away.' All the best that man has suffered remains, it has its place,—but as past, as having lived, as defunct . . . That is how it is with the civilisation of the Middle Ages; it has borne its fruit.

"More, it is impossible . . . to conceive that the sufferings and experiences of the modern age have been useless. This age, as I have said, sought to rehabilitate the creature; it has pursued that end along evil roads, but it is our duty to recognise and save the truth which is hidden, is held prisoner, in that aim.

"Finally, if it is true, and no Christian can think otherwise, that history is governed by God and that, despite all obstacles, He pursues in it a certain divine design, so that in time and through time a divine work and divine preparations are accomplished, it would be to go against God Himself and to fight against the supreme government of history to claim to make immobile in a form that is past, in a univocal form, the ideal of a culture worthy of being the aim of all our action." (pp. 132-5.)

We cannot, we may not, restore mediæval forms. And that not only because they are past, but far more because to try to do so argues a basic misunderstanding of the non-

univocal, analogical nature of the applicability of Christian social and cultural principles. We have not to restore the Middle Ages (involving as that must do, non-participation in the actual historical social situation in which we find ourselves, and so betraying the universality of our Christian social mission), *we have to create a new Christendom which will be to our historic phase what mediæval Christendom was to its.* We must, in Maritain's technical language, labour in order that "the principles of all vitally Christian civilisation be realised in terms of a new concrete analogue," (p. 133) for "the Christendom of the Middle Ages was only one of its possible forms of realisation." (p. 131.) We must indeed at all costs avoid an "equivocal" philosophy of culture which "holds that historical conditions become so different with time that their very governing principles must be heterogeneous." But we must also steer clear of a "univocal" philosophy of culture which "leads to the belief that these supreme rules and principles must be everywhere applied in the same way, and in particular, that the way in which christian principles are to be applied and realised in the varying periods of time and history ought not to vary." (p. 132.) For, "the true solution springs from the philosophy of *analogy*. The principles do not vary, neither do the supreme practical laws of human life: but they are applied in ways which are essentially diverse, corresponding to one and the same concept only by a similitude of proportion." (*ibid.*)

Is it unreasonable to see in a failure to understand this the ground of much of the confusion and division (especially here in England) regarding the temporal mission of Christianity, the situation of the modern Catholic confronted by the modern world, the seemingly incompatible and contradictory programmes which are offered us for constructing a Christian social order, the fact that we are found to base even sound practice on dubious theory? A book published the same week as this translation of *Humanisme intégrale* will perhaps illustrate my meaning, Mr. Harold Robbin's *The Sun of Justice: An Essay on the Social Teaching of the*

*Catholic Church*³ is, in many respects, an admirable exposition of Catholic social principles. Though a far easier book to read, and though doubtless far less ambitious and comprehensive, it in many respects closely resembles Maritain's book itself. Both invoke and quote the Encyclicals; both invoke and quote St. Thomas; and Mr. Robbins quotes Monsieur Maritain himself extensively, announcing him to be "the greatest living philosopher." Both enunciate similar principles; and both are fundamentally in agreement in their diagnosis of the evils of our time. Yet how widely—and how irreconcilably—they differ in their application of those principles, in their respective practical programmes! For whereas the bulk of Maritain's book is occupied with outlining the features of a *new* Christendom, a *new* realisation of the Christian social order such as is demanded by the exigencies of the time and which will integrate and purify all the values which have been retained, discovered and disfigured since the break-up of the old mediæval Christendom, Mr. Robbins urges us insistently to disregard all that and get back to the *old*. Not, he hastens to tell us, to the old because it is old (though indeed "the old truth *has* been tested, the new is to be tested *before* acceptance and not after"), for "the relation to the past is largely accidental" (p. 31). But because "The Catholic Social Teaching is timeless. It takes for its subject the nature of man, the one unchanging factor in social relations." (p. 30.)

It is here, we think, that the publication of an English edition of Maritain's *Humanisme intégrale* should supply a needed corrective to certain perilous half-truths which are current in this country. It is true that Catholic social teaching is timeless in the sense that it is not "equivocal," not heterogeneous in different ages. It has not one set of principles and standards for the thirteenth century, and another, utterly diverse and unrelated, for the twentieth. But it is not true that that teaching is "univocal" and specifically identical in every age. It is not true that it is timeless in the sense of a uniform changeless ideal, a sort of Platonic

³ Heath Cranton, 58.

Idea of an archetypal social order, to which human existence must be made to conform, cost what it may. For Christian social teaching is *essentially practical*, it is essentially ordained to realisation in time and in history, and in accordance with the exigencies of that concrete realisation in all its circumstances; apart from time and history it has no meaning, no *raison d'être*. It is true again that "it takes for its subject the nature of man, the one unchanging factor in social relations." It is based indeed on the recognition of the unity and homogeneous continuity of human nature; it is not a pragmatic, opportunist sociology which acknowledges no changeless constant beneath the historic flux of changing human existence. But we shall falsify that teaching if we *rest satisfied* to say that its subject is "the nature of man," and that "whether that nature is changing absolutely, or only relatively, need not be discussed here." For its subject is not, and cannot be, *just* the "nature of man"; it is man, or rather it is *men, as they exist in the concrete in space and time and history*; it is human nature in the unlimited variety of its factual and concrete realisations, realisation that differ from age to age and from man to man. It is not therefore enough to recognise, as does Mr. Robbins, that "there is nothing static about Catholic thought. It is always possible that some new way of implementing a permanent principle may burst upon a delighted world." It must be recognised, if we follow Maritain's cogent argument, that the principles are themselves not "permanent" if by permanent we mean "univocal" and specifically identical in their application to every historical situation.

It may be mentioned, since Maritain does not stress the point, that this idea is implicit in the social encyclicals. *Quadragesimo Anno* explains that *Rerum Novarum* was called forth by the specific exigencies of its time, and *Quadragesimo Anno* itself by the fact of fresh developments in the social and economic order and in the alignments of socialism: changes which already call for different realisations and applications of Catholic social teaching. It affirms for instance, that "History proves that the right of owner-

ship, like other elements of social life, is not absolutely rigid . . . How varied are the forms which the right of property has assumed!" A truth ignored, incidentally, in Mr. Robbins' otherwise very sound chapter on property.

The half-truths of Mr. Robbins' theory leads him into inevitable difficulties in interpreting the encyclicals. "The social encyclicals do, in fact, discuss industrial problems at some length, in addition to stating the positive social teaching of the Church." (p. 24.) In this he sees only a distinction between "the tolerable" and the "desired," the "temporary expedient" and "the permanent solution" (p. 25).⁴ It would surely be more accurate to say that the encyclicals discuss industrial problems *because* they state the positive social teaching of the Church. For these principles themselves are capable of and postulate a great variety of temporal realisations, and themselves demand that the Church be concerned with their *hic et nunc* realisation, and not with some past or future "Arcadia" (the word is Mr. Robbins'). This does not in any way mean that the Church can conceive the existing industrial system as its ideal, its final cause. But it does mean that the Church must regard it as part of its material cause, its *materia ex qua* and *super quam*. For the temporal mission of the Church is not to construct select earthly utopias; her whole orientation is eschatological. Unlike the Communists, she cannot sacrifice the individual in the present to a *ciel ici-bas* in the future. She is concerned with living individuals *as living*, and not an exclusive community of them but with all, and therefore with society *as it is*. She cannot, as Maritain shows so well, build a Kingdom of God in time; she is concerned with the temporal order to the extent that it fosters or hinders, not some *a-priori* ideal of human integrity or human society, nor even some ideal Christian community on earth, but the life of glory in eternity.

⁴ He adds "If you will, from Moral to Ascetical Theology," for his "clerical friends" have told him that Moral Theology is concerned only with negative standards, and Ascetic Theology with positive ones! Mr. Robbins has all our sympathy in finding this "strange," and we hope he will widen his circle of clerical acquaintance. May we refer him back to Père Tunmer's article in *BLACKFRIARS*, November, 1935?

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It is not the present writer's intention to suggest that the insufficiencies of the theory of Mr. Robbins and those who think with him invalidate the practice they advocate. He believes that a strong back-to-the-land policy and a programme of experimental Christian rural communities should be a foremost feature of a Catholic social programme at the present time, and especially in this country. He believes moreover that the emphasis on a sound theology and philosophy of work such has been made by several English Catholic thinkers, and their consequent emphasis on the evils of mechanisation, make an important contribution to Catholic social thought which does not seem elsewhere to have received the attention it demands. But it is one thing to advocate the self-subsistent community for the benefit of the individuals concerned, and as an important contribution to the establishment of a new Christendom and a new era of national welfare. It is quite another to present these communities as already a new Christendom, or rather the revival of an old one, as an ideal, an end in themselves, as a substitute intended to *replace* existing society. It is one thing to construct a nucleus which itself seeks continuity with history, to integrate its inheritance, and to subserve the Church's universal mission to society. It is quite another to construct a community on a "timeless" model which disregards history, which conceives Christian culture as capable of only one univocal and unalterable manner of realisation. In practice this means the difference between a policy of revolution, transformation, integration, and a policy of destruction and substitution. That is why we cannot afford to be impatient of theory. Our theory must condition the manner of our practice. That is why Maritain's book is so precious, and why its publication in England seems to us an event of perhaps even greater importance than its publication in the original.

But we would not leave the impression that Maritain's book is concerned only with theory. It is concerned very much with practice based upon that theory. He shows what must be the specifically new features of a new Christendom

—in relation, for instance, to property, to machinery, to marriage and womanhood. He outlines in some detail our immediate and realisable, as well as our more remote and at present unrealisable, objectives.

On the vitalising factor of it all he is particularly insistent: "A vitally Christian social renewal will be a work of sanctity or it will be nothing: a sanctity, that is, which has turned its energies on the things of time, of this world, of secular culture." And here again we may take from Maritain a warning. Sanctity, in this changing temporal world, is itself not univocal and uniform, but analogous. We shall err grievously if we do not thus qualify the assertion that "In the Christian religion there are not two standards of perfection, but one."⁵ One with the unity of analogy, capable of and demanding a specific variety of concrete realisations corresponding to concrete and historical circumstance—Yes! One with the unity of univocity and identity, uniform and identical regardless of historical and individual circumstances—No! So Maritain urges, "We have the right to look for a new impulse of sanctity of a new kind . . . one which may be primarily characterised as a sanctity and sanctification of *secular life*" (p. 116). If this be true, how questionable is the remark, "It seems to us that the demand that we should not ignore 'human values' is too often a demand that we should come to some arrangement with the world and the flesh and forget the existence of the devil. It is also likely to lead to a dangerous cleavage between our social and economic and our spiritual life, unless we are prepared to adapt that too to the standards of this world."⁶ It is true, of course, that human perversity can make anything a pretext for anything; we cannot make a pretext of that for neglecting what, as *True Humanism* shews conclusively is *the* imperative task of Christians in our time. But does not such reasoning precisely *presuppose* a "cleavage between our social and economic and our spiritual life," the idea that spirituality,

⁵ *Integration*, August-Sept., p. 3.

⁶ *Integration*, quoted by *Christendom*, Sept. 1938.

the life of grace, is something timeless, static, invariable, independent of history? Is there not here perhaps a confusion of the essentially temporal life of grace with the eternal life of glory? Maritain, with the vivid awareness he displays in his earlier chapters of the cultural implications of the theology of grace and nature, can make no such mistake. Grace is not, to use Mr. Robbins' dangerous spatial imagery, a "superstructure" built on nature; grace and nature interpenetrate. The temporal indeed subserves the eternal and the eschatological; it does not, at least in the same sense, subserve the life of grace and "spirituality." The latter is itself temporal, and realises an indefinite variety of its limitless possibilities in accordance with temporal exigencies and vicissitudes. "For," says Maritain, "the justice of the Gospels claims to penetrate all things, to be concerned with all things, to affect the lowest things as well as the highest. More, it can be pointed out that this evangelical principle is only progressively manifested and translated in concrete terms, and that the process of this realisation is by no means complete." (p. 118.) So must we look for a "new kind of sanctity," a "new stage in the sanctification of what is profane," characterised, among other things, by the "descent of the uncreated Love into the depths of the human, to transfigure without annihilating it." (pp. 118-9.)

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We have only to ask ourselves that question of Maritain's to answer it with his own emphatic Yes. We shall at once learn that we cannot give uncritical credence to those glib charges of "compromise" which are so easy to make, so difficult to sustain. Rather shall we learn to suspect any assertion of the rigidity and simplicity of principles which is unaccompanied by recognition of the flexibility and complexity of their application, of the multifarious potentialities of their temporal realisation—any assertion which seems to restrict the powers of grace, the sanctifying powers of Christ and His Sacraments in history. If *True Humanism* teaches us no more than that it will have taught us much we need to learn.

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