

OBITER

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICS ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICE in France was the subject of a lecture given by Professor Gabriel Le Bras of the Sorbonne to the *Centre Catholique des Intellectuels Français* and now reprinted in *Cahiers du Droit*, the admirable review published by the union of French Catholic law students.

M. le Bras begins by asking whether one can at all estimate religious practice. He finds three broad categories among Frenchmen, namely occasional conformists (who 'only enter a church four times in their lives—in their nurses' arms, dragged in for first communion, brought by their brides, and finally covered by their shrouds'), regular observants (Sunday mass and Easter communion), and the devout. His second question relates to the nature of political power, which can be direct (e.g. prohibition or enactment of church attendance) or indirect (e.g. laws favouring divorce).

Historically (and M. le Bras's observations are based on a detailed study of diocesan registers and other documents) the eighteenth century seems to have seen the high-water mark of religious observance (with only 5 per cent of non-conformists in rural parts). With the Revolution all is changed, and subsequent attempts under the Restoration and the Second Empire to favour religious practice by direct action were disastrous. The Third Republic, hostile to the Church, exercised its direct power in the other direction (secular education, divorce, expulsion of religious congregations).

M. le Bras concludes that:

Whenever the political power has taken direct measures, whether for or against the Church, religious practice has declined. Direct action, favourable or otherwise, is always harmful. Indirect action is dangerous. The only course that can have a favourable effect is incidental action, e.g. provision for the upkeep of buildings and for the support of the clergy living under intolerable difficulties.

Having regard to the anti-clericalism endemic to French public life, M. le Bras is not optimistic, but he thinks measures of this 'incidental' sort (especially financial adjustments to enable parishes to reform their budgets) might be possible. He does not look for direct action, which, historically, he shows to have been disastrous for religion in France.

THE SCOTTISH JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY (Oliver and Boyd, 3s. 6d.) in its first number comes out boldly with a defence of theology, which must precede the multifarious debates—sociological, ecumenical and such—which nowadays engage the primary attention of many Christian bodies. The Journal is primarily the organ of ministers and members of the Church of Scotland, and the articles for the most part reflect the preoccupations of the theological schools of the Scottish Universities. Notable is an essay on 'The Christian Understanding of Truth' by Professor Mackinnon of Aberdeen.

The Christian is forced by the very nature of his faith to engage, at the level of faith, with the problem of the truth of it. And by this engagement he is inevitably compelled to take account of the philosophical debates that centre on the notion. Again and again he is tempted either to take sides or alternatively to offer his own theory as some kind of further option. And, of course, because his concern springs from the mystery of faith, this is just what he cannot do, any more than he can take sides. It is the ceaseless to and fro of the debate that is the significant thing.

THE PRIEST AND THE PROLETARIAT by Robert Kothen (Sheed and Ward, 2s. 6d.) is a useful pamphlet which brings together the testimonies of some of those priests on the Continent who have attempted new methods to bridge the gap between the Church and the working-classes. It draws heavily on Père Perrin's *Priest-Workman in Germany*, but it seems unrealistic to suppose that his extraordinary circumstances can provide a valid parallel for the ordinary apostolate. Indeed the Abbé Kothen seems wanting in the capacity of criticism which is so necessary if pastoral innovations in France are to avoid either being blindly accepted as universally necessary (much of the work is recent and experimental and its effects are yet to be seen) or of being rejected as wholly deplorable (because they cut across established custom). It is for instance little use urging that 'There should arise a liturgy of *work*' unless the implications of such a piece of hyperbole are steadily examined.

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