

## POLITICS AND ETERNITY

“IF life must come to an end,” says Fritz Strich,<sup>1</sup> “it is not in itself necessary; it is not bound to live. Out of the depths of this dolorous recognition and experience there arises that which alone makes the spirit to be spirit, and man, man: the will to something that is necessary in itself, that necessarily must perdure and never can terminate.”

“The will to something necessary”: echoes of the Schopenhauerian world as will and imagination? An eminently “Western” will; a will to action, to movement. A will to change, then? And yet a will to something unchangeable, necessary in itself, solidly static!

“Unquiet is the human heart, until it rests in Thee, O God,” confessed St. Augustine. He did not, in the first place, “will” God: before willing Him, He recognized that He was already, and that He is necessary in Himself—not only so, but that He is the only thing that is necessary in itself. Knowing God, he willed to rest in Him and thus to transcend the world of change and death, of becoming and ending, the world of *samsāra*, as Indian thought would express itself.

For our St. Augustine’s experience is that of every religious soul: the fundamental note of Hindu Philosophy for instance is just this contrast between SAT and BHU, between *Being* and *Becoming*; and its basic problem has ever been how to reconcile the two. To Indian thought SAT is so much the only really real Reality, that by comparison BHU is a world of greater or lesser unreality only: the *aseity* of the *Unus Necessarius* in its peerless splendour almost blinds it to that world of contingency, which is necessarily unnecessary. Hinduism has exaggerated the comparative insignificance of the contingent and temporal to such an extent that, for one of its schools of thought at least, it does not really exist at all, but is the phantasm of a mind, disordered by folly.

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<sup>1</sup> *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik*, München, 1928, p. 4.

In Europe the exaggeration has not been that of Being, but of becoming. Engrossed in ringing the changes in the changeable, man has more and more lost touch with that which transcends the world of time and change—God, the “I am Who am.” In post-Renaissance thought God has ever further receded as man’s Last End: the more its thinkers approximated to the attitude that they “had no further use for that hypothesis” (viz. God), the more they receded from thought itself and substituted for it the will to activity, to busy-ness.

And yet there remains ineradicable in man’s soul the longing for something that will perdure: witness the above quoted passage from Fritz Strich. But, since the contingent seems to modern man to fill the whole stage, to obtain the non-contingent that he desires, he sees no other means than to create it himself out of the contingent. That is the whole gist of Humanism: man’s will to be his own saviour out of a world that only generates in order to corrupt. This unstable, evanescent, ever into nothingness dissolving world man would perfect, so that gradually and ultimately it shall reach perfection and, no longer capable of further perfection, will remain in such perfection immutably, triumphantly, eternally. Man himself will thus transmute the mutable into the immutable and Time into Eternity. Man, “enslaved to matter, whether through Science or the State, makes a supreme effort to save a godless world by his own unaided force,” as Jacques Maritain<sup>2</sup> puts it; whilst Fritz Strich sums up his own Humanism in the pregnant parallel sentence: “all systems of human civilization—whether religion, philosophy, art or politics—have only this one meaning and this one aim: Eternalization.”<sup>3</sup>

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The modern Western exaggeration of the temporal has had its inevitable reactions in religious thought. From it dates the modern habit of segregating the two spheres of Being and of Becoming into two water-tight compartments,

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<sup>2</sup> “A New Christian Order” (*Colosseum*, June, 1935).

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

as if they were two worlds which had absolutely nothing to do one with another. Profane and sacred, secular and ecclesiastical, temporal and spiritual, economics and morality, are terms which became mutually exclusive. Lutheran pietism perhaps went furthest in thus not only distinguishing but separating God and Caesar. The sublunary world, this vale of tears, it held, had become so corrupted by Original Sin—not only disordered in its operation, but changed in its very nature—that it had become altogether evil and unfit for eternalization. The Manichaean error made its reappearance: the body once more was thought of as the prison-house of the soul and everything earthly as something religiously to be shunned; and the sole occupation worthy of a Christian was defined as the sanctification of one's own soul. The prevailing individualism of the time—both cause and effect of this ego-centric pietism—served to accentuate this flight of the soul from contamination with Society, the State, politics, into a devotional heaven of "pure" spirituality.

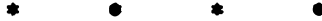
It would be idle to deny that these reactions touched also Catholic thought. Political history helped to accentuate the drift: after a valiant protest against the absolutist claims of post-Reformation princes, Catholicism settled down in Catholic countries to an uneasy acquiescence in a régime, the Josephist tendency of which was but thinly disguised by an outward show of attachment to the Chair of St. Peter. What wonder that in such circumstances the sanctification of the individual soul engrossed the attention of devout Catholics to the exclusion almost of any thought concerning their social and political environment. In countries where the French Revolution and its aftermath subsequently installed governments frankly hostile to religion, Catholics were indeed compelled to enter the political arena for "the temporal defence of their religious liberties and interests" (to employ the words of Jacques Maritain<sup>4</sup>): but this, though "indispensable and necessary," was, as he is careful to add, "not enough." Yet in most countries in which they found themselves in a minority the Catholics preferred to retire into

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<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

their shells, once active fighting against a religious disability was over. As a result a mentality often resulted which looked down on politics as "a dirty game," that an aspirant after sanctity would naturally leave severely alone, and which gave itself superior airs by criticizing all political parties and by finding flaws in every measure promoted by any of them.

True, this Catholic segregation policy regarding the political life of their respective countries did not obtain everywhere. In Germany, for instance, the fight for their "religious liberties and interests" led Catholics to perpetuate their *ad hoc* political organization and to extend it to all political questions, whether affecting religion or not. This development led to a sham-unity of all Catholics, which pretended that, because as a Catholic one must support, say, the Centrum's fight for the re-admission of the Jesuits, one also ought to support its demands for or against Free-Trade. This simulation of a fundamental unity, where none exists, has in the end led to the ultimate collapse of these so-called "Catholic" political parties: a collapse, speeded up by the totalitarian claims of dictators, but in any case a good riddance.



For this riddance, it seems to me, has opened the way to a truer appreciation of what the Catholic's attitude towards politics should be. It has made us all distinguish more clearly between the churchmanship and the citizenship of a Catholic; and it has made us reflect that there can be no fundamental contradiction between these two functions of his.

Once more the fact that man is a "political animal" has been acutely realized: that for "the good life" man must live in Society, and that man's civilization is based on his being a *civis*, a citizen. Spiritual individualism has been discredited, as well as economic.

Still, the fundamental difficulty remains: that the soul of the individual human person, because immortal, transcends all possible political values, because merely temporal. That the chief objective of each soul should be its own sanctification, is self-evident: but why should man, just because he

is a social being on earth, also aim at the sanctification of his environment? That this is the kernel of a difficulty still felt by many, can not be doubted.

One line of argument consists in comparing man's social activities, politics included, to a child's exercises in the three R's: i.e., as having no objective value in themselves, but only serving, subjectively, to train the learner—there, the child in the technique of writing, etc.; here, man in the acquisition of virtues. Since however these latter virtues are of course such as depend for their exercise on social intercourse and on the duties of man towards his fellows, the question arises at once, what purpose can such social virtues have for Eternity, if the social relationship itself is merely temporal? And this question is strongly reinforced by a feeling of repugnance which would paralyze the political and other social activities of men, who could no longer take seriously duties reduced to the value of exercise books whose ultimate destiny is the waste-paper basket. "Let's pretend" is an excellent incentive for children's games: it is worse than useless for grown-up men who would build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

The answer of course must be that man remains a social being, in heaven no less than on earth—just as he retains a body, nay, *his* body, not only in this, but in the next world. Man's body is not a toy to be thrown away, when he has acquired the virtue of subjecting it to his spirit: man after death does not change his own for an angelic nature, but will reach beatitude in his own nature—body and soul—supernaturally glorified. The resurrection-body, which will be the soul's perfect instrument, is the same as our present body of humiliation, only transmuted, as Our Lord's body was: but that transmutation will be conditioned by the extent to which we have let Grace transfigure this body of ours here on earth.

If this is true of our individual body, why should parallel reasoning not be applicable to our social body as well? It will be said that the Christian's social body is the Church, is the Mystical Body of Christ. True: but where is in that case room for man's citizenship? By a round-about way we seem

only to have got back to our old bogey, the waste-paper basket. To get out of this vicious circle, let us follow a signpost set up by Jacques Maritain in a paper read by him at the Thomist Congress held in August of last year in Poznań.<sup>5</sup>

At the outset, he distinguishes between Christian Church and Christendom. By the word "Christendom" he designates "a common, temporal régime of peoples educated in and formed by the Christian Faith. Hence, there can be only one integral religious truth and only one Catholic Church; but there can be a number of Christian civilizations and of different Christendoms" (p. 184). The underlying principle—I may perhaps add—is that, as St. Thomas says in his *Summa* (I, 47, 1, 3), "if the means be equal to the end, one only is sufficient." God is the last end of man: but no temporal means are equal to Him—therefore there must be many alternative means of converting the temporal Godwards. Moreover, these temporal means are not merely "instrumental" means to an end, as the brush is to the portrait, but "have the proper value of an intermediary end and constitute chief Secondary Causes which produce an effect proportionate to their own specific being"<sup>6</sup>—"while remaining means, they are also an end on their own account."<sup>7</sup>

Maritain's penetrating study shows how the neglect of these two distinctions led in the Middle Ages to the identification of Church and State: the temporal political organization of the City—the Holy Roman Empire—being considered as a purely instrumental "function of the sacral" and as the only possible one at that. This error of thinking, that the Holy Roman Empire was the unique method of the Church's action upon the World, led to the stultification of the Church on the temporal plane and I see in the Great Schism the culmination of this wrong tendency, which for the duration of this period certainly rendered the Papacy incapable of guiding the salvation of human society.

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<sup>5</sup> I translate from the text, as published in the *Vie Spirituelle* of January 25, 1935.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> *Colosseum*, p. 89.

To-day we have got far away from the Holy Roman Empire. The authority of the State, Leo XIII has taught us, is supreme in its own order. The autonomy of a temporal entity *qua* intermediary end has replaced the concept of its mere ministeriality subserving the spiritual. Many types of a godly city are possible in the world.

With this new light on our search, let us return to the distinction we made between man's Churchmanship and his Citizenship, which the sacred concept of the Holy Roman Empire had confounded.

*Polis* and *Ekklesia*, we have seen, do not coincide here; in the nature of things they cannot do so—here. But “ab hac terrena Jerusalem incipit, ad illam coelestem Ecclesia terminat,” says already St. Augustine (*Enarrationes in Psalm.* 147). Here, all temporal activity admits of alternatives, nay, demands a choice between a number of possibilities. The Church should inspire them all: but it is left to the *terrena civitas* to make the selection.

And this selection cannot be otiose: if, as St. Augustine says, it is to end in the Heavenly Jerusalem, then the temporal elements of our social relationships here below must be capable of eternalization. “Nothing defiled nor that worketh abomination nor maketh a lie” (Apoc. xxi, 27) of course can expect to be taken up into “the holy city coming down out of heaven from God” (Apoc. xxi, 10): but it is a City right enough of which we are to form part in heaven, even as on earth we have been created for constituting a City; and into that Heavenly City all “the glory and honour of the nations shall be brought” (Apoc. xxi, 26). The City is God-given and not a man-constructed Utopia: yet human elements too are admitted, human collaboration is not excluded. The work of Redemption may and should be shared in by man—in his social no less than in his individual aspect.

The grandiose prospect thus opens out before man's eyes of being entrusted with a collaboration that, so far from being otiose (like baby “helping” mother), is truly responsible work—God's almost unimaginable condescension going

so far as to leave it to man to select the materials for a Heavenly City over which He accepts in advance to reign as its King. In this altogether wonderful manner will God fulfil the primordial promise He made to Adam at the very dawn of Creation, that he should be lord of all creation (Gen. i, 26)—and to those who, doubting, wonder how such things can be, I think it is legitimate to point to Our Lord's relationship to His earthly parents, to whom we are expressly told (Lk. ii, 51) that "He was subject." As regards the temporal needs of the Holy Child, the decision lay with St. Joseph: but is this responsible stewardship, of which St. Joseph is so supereminent a human exemplar, not the very keynote of what all men's dealings in temporal affairs should be? The foster-father of Jesus is also the Patron and Protector of Christ's mystical body on earth, His Church—a guarantee, surely, that man's social relationships, though temporal, are capable of being eternalized.

Placed in this world of Time and Becoming, man's task is to choose between possibilities *sub specie aeternitatis*. In Eternity, in the Heaven of pure Being, there are no further possibilities: *polis* and *ekklesia* will become one, civil and ecclesiastical coincide and all activity becomes liturgy. What we have here chosen as our social expression will there—eternalized—become our "reasonable service": and the Kingship of Christ only underlines the religio-political essence of all liturgy, which is already the angelic mode of worship.

Man's instinctive urge to eternalize the temporal is legitimate and not destined to end in frustration: provided that man means to offer up to God what his reason has subjugated—be that his body or his soul, his individuality or his polity. Man, inasmuch as a part of Christ's Mystical Body, is a leaven, meant to transmute the whole world of Becoming. Quantitatively minute, he is a ferment capable by indwelling Grace to turn the water of nature into the wine of supernature, and time into eternity.

Let us then work, while there is yet time: the night cometh, when no man can work. Let us spiritualize the material and eternalize the temporal for Christ and His



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Kingdom; in Him, with Him and for Him, let us redeem the time, *our* time, for the day when "time shall be no longer and the mystery of God shall be finished" (Apoc. x, 6-7).

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