

THE INTELLECTUAL APOSTOLATE IN
SOUTH AFRICA

WHAT I wish to do here is to touch upon some points in the intellectual and cultural situation in South Africa. This means that I must confine myself to a picture of what Europeans¹ are doing, since the disadvantages under which non-Europeans are labouring have not made possible for them much acquisition of the natural goods. The Church in South Africa is above all an African church. Europeans, and especially European Catholics, are in a minority. Hence I shall be dealing with a minority which has largely monopolised the privileges of education and which must therefore be held peculiarly accountable for the use of the treasure which it has appropriated. My further reason for thus confining my field is the large part being played in the conversion of South Africa by the Dominicans who are so well versed in grafting the Faith upon the higher activities of the natural man.

In estimating the influences which have formed the mind of South African Europeans one must be careful to give full weight to the positive contribution of Calvinism, especially the Calvinism of the Dutch Reformed Church. The original colonists were Dutch and French Protestants, and the great majority of their descendants still hold to that confession, seriously and conservatively, as a rural population will. It is a tradition which has fostered Bible-reading, a strong and genuine family life, and the virtues enjoined by the Decalogue. It has been favourable to the formation of a legalistic and patriarchal temper of mind, and has kept alive a strong anti-papist animus. It is not within my province to estimate the religious situation, but rather to call attention to certain repercussions in the cultural sphere. The emphasis upon the Old Testament and the Puritanism of Calvinist ethics have proved deadly to popular art. Among the rural population, which is largely Afrikaner, there is no peasant art like the wood-carving of the Tyrolese or the dancing and pageantry of the Spaniards. The sacramental mind is absent and the liturgy, that fountain of beauty, measure, and graciousness which holds together indivisibly the things of the body and of the spirit, is

¹ In the course of this article I shall make use of the terms European, non-European, coloured, African, and Afrikaner. A South African European is any white man, that is, anybody of unmixed descent, from any of the European nations. Non-Europeans are all others. The name coloured person is given to those who are of mixed descent from European and native or Asiatic stock. An African is any member of a Bantu tribe. An Afrikaner is any Afrikaans-speaking descendant of the original Dutch settlers or of the French Huguenot settlers, who were assimilated to them. English and Afrikaner are roughly equal in numbers and constitute about a fifth of the total population. There is also a considerable Indian element.

dismissed as parrot-repetition or idolatory. The depression of the natural order also makes itself felt in the field of philosophy. The religious temper of the Afrikaner is pietistic, and philosophy as a work of the 'sinful reason' is regarded as incapable of establishing truths like that of God's existence. The havoc wrought by the Reformed doctrine of the Fall, and the destruction of analogical thinking are plainly to be seen here. There is a dualism of the realms of nature and grace which on the one hand leaves nature to go its own course, and on the other trivialises grace by asking it to do that for which our natural faculties are sufficient. This leads to a great contraction of the range of religious response, since it tends to be true that where all is by grace nothing is by grace. It leads to an awkward moral self-consciousness easily followed by revolt. The emphasis in the seminaries upon theology and revelation is such as to produce a great measure of impotence in formulating a Christian attitude to certain problems in the natural order, like those of politics and economics. There is a strain of what I may term Calvinistic Scholasticism in the Transvaal, however, of which my last observation is not wholly true, and which has produced some enquiring minds within the ambit of orthodoxy. A final point to observe is that Afrikaner Calvinism displays a universal weakness of Protestantism, a tendency to be treated as itself a cultural phenomenon, and to become an integral part of Afrikaner Nationalism and race-consciousness. This is a reduction of religion itself to the order of nature, which robs it of its universal and missionary character. Hence it becomes unpatriotic to become, say, a Catholic; neither would the average Afrikaner regard it as his duty to try to introduce an Englishman or an African to his own congregation. This contraction of charity creates a kind of Christian Judaism.

While, then, religion enters as a cultural issue in Afrikaner politics, Calvinism is on the whole sterile in the arts and in philosophy. One of the reasons is that philosophy and many forms of art require an urban environment. The Afrikaner is for the first time in his history coming in large numbers into the towns, into an industrialised² environment, and this with marked consequences for religion. On the one hand there is a falling away into sects, and, especially among the better-off, an almost universal dissatisfaction or indifferentism. A rural population becoming urbanised is always vigorous and creative, and the intellectual future of South Africa will be greatly influenced by the Afrikaner in the towns. Already the best periodical literature is in the Afrikaans language. I do not think that Calvinism is going to Christianise this future, and if Catholicism does not do so it will be

² I am not implying that art requires industrialisation.

pagan. It would be a failure in charity as well as in tactics to allow the forces of secularism and paganism to clear the ground before stepping in, as though the latter were not by far the more intractable to the Faith, and as though Protestantism could not be regarded as incipiently Catholic. The uprooted urbanised Afrikaner must be converted now.

One of the necessary factors in this leavening process, i.e., a lay apostolate for educated Catholics, is largely lacking. South African Catholics are in a minority, are conspicuously absent from eminent places in arts, letters and politics, and so take on the colour of their surroundings that the cultural postulates of the Faith are lacking.³ On the whole, their way of life is the English way of life, and South African English have been singularly barren in the things of the mind. An urban element in towns of so little antiquity, and expecting to import instead of creating their intellectual goods, they have given the world very little of value.

It is impossible to deal with, yet impossible to omit mention of South African Jews. The population of South Africa contains proportionately a very much larger number of Jews than that of England or France or pre-war Germany, and their influence is correspondingly felt. The Jewish problem is essentially a spiritual problem. It rises from the act committed by the world's most historical people, the act which put them outside of what was significant in a future in the midst of which they have been providentially preserved. Hence they endure in an essentially non-historical way in a world which has been given life by the fruits of their own past. From a Jewish girl sprang the Catholic Church, and yet, in the sense in which Belloc's dictum is true that the Catholic Church is the culture of Europe, they have no part in that culture because they cannot understand it. Hence there is no Jewish culture properly speaking, but a number of cultural phenomena bound together by a law which the unconverted Jew cannot understand. These phenomena exhibit various forms of frustration and imperfect adaptation, of which versatility in assimilation is one. The opiate of materialism is another. Deracinated, without real historical movement, and yet spiritually intense, the educated Jew takes readily to modernism, liberalism, or communism. By these he endeavours to blanket his cultural scepticism, and from the latter these movements take their destructive force. These things are easily to be observed in South Africa where, as elsewhere, the alternative to anti-Semitism is the conversion of Israel. The Jew is still the potential Christian *par excellence*, and the conversion of the Jew will reveal unheard-of riches in the Catholic Church.

³ Among the things that would help is better Catholic bookselling.

The heterogeneity of elements in the South African scenes, Afrikaner, English, Jew, coloured, and several African nations, requires either a higher cultural synthesis which in the end can be nothing other than a distinctive Catholic culture or an appalling deterioration in which one element will dominate precariously by force; or in which all, reduced to a lowest common factor, will share a common slavery. I do not believe in the orthodox liberal solution because I can see no pre-established harmony between the elements in the situation. Every element has its own restless logic by which it seeks a universal, and there is only one true universal. Our fluid and precarious condition can be profitably studied in the universities which should, of course, be among the main points of universalisation in the country.

The main defect of South African Universities and University Colleges is that they are bundles of more or less uncoordinated faculties orientated towards giving the community what it wants, which by and large is a good start in the race for money and social standing. Hence the universities are primarily schools of engineering and medicine, with growing faculties of social science as the need for patching up and regimenting the social machine becomes more and more obvious. To put it differently, the thought of the directors of South African education is dominated by the biological category of adaptation to environment. Both schools and universities try to be what people *outside* them want them to be: a patently vicious circle because those inside them, will one day be those outside, and thus the mad circle of insubstantiality will be perpetuated. The process starts in the schools with a growing tendency to eliminate classics and history from the curriculum, in favour of 'useful' subjects. Thus the humanising elements in the schools, by which scholars are taught what human society and human action are, are abandoned under the exigencies of social pressures which the scholar is now precisely incapable of understanding. He is thus prepared for the rôle of an industrial and political pawn. This process is continued in the universities, where the great majority of students study the physical sciences and the mechanical arts. These students are generally under no obligation to pay any attention to the humanities and by far the greater number do not do so. Thus a student may become an architect or an engineer—a man who is to construct the spiritually intensely significant external framework of human life—without any real knowledge of what he is doing. He may become a doctor, with a doctor's intimate contact with family life, without having any real inner culture. He may become a social scientist without having given an hour's study to moral or political philosophy. His utilitarian adaptation to social exigencies thus marks out the university man as the foreordained instrument or catspaw of hidden interests and pressures.

This is accompanied by a formlessness in the humanities themselves and a lack of conviction and sense of vocation in those who profess them. In a South African university it is possible to take an M.A. in History or English, or an Ll.B without opening a book on philosophy.⁴ Neither can the physical sciences and the mechanical arts themselves be said to flourish except by purely quantitative standards. The schools consist of overworked teachers turning out professional men. Even were there more time for and interest in research, it is true that the speculative gifts necessary for really original research are the offspring of philosophy and theology. At the two largest South African universities, Cape Town and Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), there is no faculty of theology, and therefore philosophy itself is largely unorientated. There is no common mind among academic philosophers in South Africa, and I do not think that any two of them could do uncoordinated work upon an ultimate problem. Each is busy with his own little house somewhere off the Agora and no stone is hewn for the Parthenon. Such are the effects of a negative secular liberalism as a first principle in education.

Clearly these evils are the result of an indifference to God and—inevitable consequence—disrespect for the human intellect. The origin of this disrespect for human reason is the same here as elsewhere. It arises from an instrumental view of mind native to a positivistic social climate. The mind is regarded as a purely natural function, a means for the attainment of certain extra-intellectual ends. The cultivation of mind is not regarded as an end in itself, neither is it thought capable of real creativity or origination. Education thus falls into the category of means, means to an end somewhere outside of education. The mind is, so to speak, emptied of itself, and an ontological gap is formed by its rebellion against its own active substantiality. Into the house thus swept and garnished enter the seven devils who are the parodies of substantiality and of God's active and satisfying truth. No man can live without a philosophy, no man can live without a theology, no man can live without a final end, and these creep in again as superstitions, hypostatizations, positivisms, political religions which commence as the worship of man, and finding him empty turn into devil worship. Reenter he

⁴ The word 'accidie', used for instance by Julian of Norwich, has disappeared from use in English not because the vice has disappeared but rather because it is too much with us. *De se*, says St Thomas, it is a mortal sin. But we are encouraged to remain in it because we cannot label it. It is an aversion in the will from work because of a loss of joy, hope and trust in the divine good, a listlessness of the will because of a loss of interest in God. It thus gives rise to sloth and somnolence—one calls to mind here the terrible defenceless passivity in which the atom-bomb is accepted and acquiesced in—and to the obverse side of the same sin, activism, which is a senseless running about equally far from action because it is not rooted in a rational will directed to its final good.

who shines through the cloud of unknowing, as the Prince of Darkness.

The great need of higher education here is the re-discovery of Substance, the stopping of the corrosive fluency which is rinsing the heart out of man. This means the rediscovery of the Rock. Particularly in this age it requires the diffusion of Thomist thought, which, setting the intellect within itself because it sets it in God, can give to educational institutions that autonomy necessary for a creativity analogous to God's. It is this which can make of our schools and universities, not sounding-boards which echo the discords of South African life, but places where those hearts and minds are formed which can confront the community with something which is new with the astounding and eternal novelty of God.

This, under God, is the task of the Dominicans in South Africa. Their schools are well established. What is new is the establishment of a theological seminary. This, too, is missionary in its character. Its task is nothing less than the defence of human reason itself, that is, of the proper hierarchy of the intellect which ordains that we shall know both this and that, first this and then that. The conception of intellectual habits would transform South African higher education. We hope that among its fruits will be the creation of Catholic lay thinkers and artists, and among non-Catholics, an insight into the intellectual grandeur of the Faith. Fortunately, enough of our Christian heritage of freedom remains for these activities to be carried on. That is the broad happy positive and providential side of a picture which, perhaps, I have painted in rather dark colours. A Protestant country is still a Christian country, though Protestantism cannot long withstand the diabolical element in the modern world. It belongs to the Dominican spirit to recognise and value the existing good, and to conserve and fulfil rather than to destroy. There is much that is good in our country, our life, our institutions and our traditions which nevertheless cannot long be supported on its present base. It is Catholicism alone which can preserve, and preserve by transforming, that there are of free institutions and Protestant Christianity in this country.

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