

## THE CHRISTIAN LEAVEN<sup>1</sup>

I HAVE been asked to speak on the Christian leaven in the University. It is an important subject and one on which I myself feel strongly. The view which I am going to put forward will not I know be generally accepted; it does not claim to be the only view which can be taken of the situation, but it is one which, in my opinion, is at the present time too little stressed; I may therefore be forgiven if in this short space I state my case rather strongly, and I should like to apologise beforehand to all those whom I am now about to provoke. I do not mean to be offensive, but it is difficult to put what I want to say shortly and clearly without seeming to be so.

I propose in this paper to exclude all other considerations, and to state as forcibly as I can just one, perhaps rather narrow, view, essentially a convert's view, of what the Christian Leaven is, and what it might be. I speak moreover not merely as a convert from Protestantism to Catholicism, but from Paganism to Christianity, and this is a far more revolutionary conversion, different not only in degree but almost in kind. . . . St. Augustine as compared with Cardinal Newman. It is necessarily of more significance for the modern world in as much as the modern world itself is overwhelmingly pagan and not protestant and for this reason it is important to try and realise what is in fact involved in such conversion; it is not merely a question of Apostolic Succession or the validity of Anglican Orders which is at issue, but our entire conception of existence, the question of God's existence and the nature of man.

It is difficult for those who have always had belief of some sort, however vague and undogmatic it may have been, to conceive at all really a Godless world. I have heard many Cradle-Christians say that everybody must believe in God, even if they do not realise it, because it is impossible not to do so; well, they are wrong. Thousands, I suppose millions of people all around them do really and truly not believe at all, and the difference that this implies is terrific.

The fanaticism of converts is proverbial; I always feel myself a fanatic when I hear good and sincere Christians expatiate (and it is quite often Catholics who do so) on the unconscious Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> The substance of an address to the University Catholic Federation Regional Meeting, Oxford, November 28th, 1942.

in the pagan goodness that they meet with, because to me with my experience of entirely non-Christian values, my remembrance of a really Godless world, the utter difference between Christian and pagan so far outweighs any occasional superficial likeness. I feel impelled to interrupt and say: 'You don't know what it is you are talking about, and I do know! Everything is changed, everything is revolutionised, by Christianity, by Faith. The difference is so overwhelming, so far-reaching that any lesser likeness is blotted out!'

The counterpart of this exalted state is naturally that we 'totalitarian' converts are disappointed, or at least baffled by the apparent lack of exaltation in the average lifelong Christian. He takes it all for granted, as a matter of course; all this that to us is so staggering and so new, is hardly even interesting to him, and we are well aware that he on his side finds us tiresome and a bit absurd because we are so unnecessarily excited over quite obvious and simple facts.

To some extent I suppose this situation is inevitable. It is difficult to feel much excited over a truth that one has always known, however important, but on the other hand it is impossible to remain unmoved by so terrific a discovery as the existence of God and of Redemption, if they have broken upon you as new truth. There is bound to be a difference of emphasis, of tempo.

I am fully aware of the great disadvantage of being a convert. I hope that I shall not offend my fellow-converts when I say that we can never hope to make up for our lost years; something lingers about us of our past errors, an instinctive way of approach, a reaction or lack of re-action which betrays us; we were not 'born in the purple' and can never be quite as though we had been. This is surely right and as it should be, for if it were not an immense advantage to have a Catholic upbringing, why should we all attach so much importance to Catholic schools and education? It is most evidently a great gain to have been born and to grow up harmoniously in full Christian knowledge and in Grace. Do not imagine I do not recognise this; I do only too well, but what I want to suggest to-day is that as a certain compensation for our lack, we converts may be able to see more clearly, more distinctly, the utter difference of Christianity.

This question of likeness or difference is of direct importance for our subject, the Christian leaven in the University, for if we are to form a true idea of that leaven, we must also have a true conception of the dough in which it is to work, and of the relation between them.

How then must we see the University? The University represents at all times a concentrated form of the prevalent world mentality, for the ideas of the University influence, for good or evil, the general intellectual life of the nation, and in their turn are then re-influenced by it. In a Christian age the Universities were, as we know, centres of Christian learning, they both influenced and reflected a Christian world-opinion, they were a focus of constructive thinking; in a pagan age like our own, an age of negation and disintegration, the Universities become a focal point for that disintegration. Thought at the University to-day is in general more negative, more destructive, more pagan, than the average thought of the world outside it; it is of the same character and reflects the same tendencies but in a more vocal and intensive form.

To put it briefly; in a good age, the University will be a good place, in a bad age, it will be a bad place, and we are living now in a very bad age indeed. I know that you will not all agree with me, but supposing for the moment that I am right, or even partly right, in my view of the University to-day, how must we see the Christian leaven in it? I submit that it should be dynamite!

The action of leaven in dough suggests a gentle process harmonious and as it were co-operative; that would be an excellent illustration of the effect of some form of more active and intense Christian life working in and through less perfect Christians, but when we have, as is the case to-day, a tiny Christian leaven inserted not into a less active Christian lump, but in a lump that is entirely alien and hostile to it, it cannot work in that harmonious way; if it is to work at all, it must be dynamic. The leaven is so tiny, the lump so alien, that a normally potent yeast will be quite ineffective; it will be neutralised and smothered almost before it has begun to work. What is essential, if it is to be effective, is a leaven so potent and so concentrated that at the slightest impact it explodes! Now with all deference to the Cradle-Christians, I say that to the 'totalitarian' convert, the Christian Revelation is explosive to a degree that eclipses dynamite. It is a shattering illumination in contact with the world of unbelief. Think of what happened to St. Paul on the road to Damascus, yet he was already a believing Jew, he was far nearer than the world to-day to the new truth that was to break upon him.. It is explosive, it is revolutionary, it is a turning of things upside down, as it makes impact upon a world without it, and this is what the world to-day is wanting: . . . to be re-made, to be turned upside down, to be re-born of the Holy Ghost and of fire!

This is of course all very apocalyptic; sometimes, I maintain, it is a good thing to be so. St. Paul was apocalyptic, so was St.

Augustine; it is in fact difficult not to be so, if you have been knocked down and then re-made. And here I come to the essential question; is the Christian Leaven in this University, or in any other in England, of this explosive, dynamic nature? Is it turning the pagan University upside down, knocking it over, blinding it with light? Or is it so frightened of being apocalyptic that it has ceased to be dynamic? If that has happened, in the world as it is to-day, the leaven has in fact ceased to be leaven at all, it is but a little soggy lump of yeast that will not rise.

This may sound not only apocalyptic, but also vague and in the air. What do I mean in practise, you may ask, how is the leaven to become explosive? The obvious answer is, 'by being more Christian.' That is not only the obvious answer, but the only one, but it is not explicit, and if I have to be explicit, again I must risk being offensive. I would say: 'The Christian must proclaim himself a Christian, he must not seem ashamed of what he is, of what he stands for, as now he strangely often seems to be.'

It is indeed bewildering to find so many Christians (and by Christians I mean Catholics) who seem to be ashamed of their own glory, who seem apologetic, on the defensive, so anxious to avoid attracting notice as Christians, that they succeed in being unrecognised. The wish to be like everybody else may indicate a certain social sense, an instinctive anti-isolationism which, up to a certain point, is sound, but we do not as a rule carry it to such lengths as to conceal distinctions that we are proud of. If we were Princes, we should not want, I think, to be mistaken for ordinary commoners, we should wish to be recognised as Princes. Yet as Christians we are more than Princes, how is it that we do not proclaim our status?

When the young are chiefly at pains not to be 'different' from the young pagans with whom they consort, when the old are chiefly concerned to avoid all possible 'friction'—when even the members of the Religious Orders go about disguised as Anglican clergymen—how is the poor world to be set on fire?

The leaven cannot work if it is afraid of working.

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