

helping Christ. It is remarkable that far more Catholics do not come forward to seek this unique opportunity. It is the lack of people with this viewpoint that endangers local government.

The responsibility is also there. To run the human race God has distributed many gifts. It would be a sad day for humanity if we were all first-class opera singers. Such a day will never come because God has not bestowed his gifts in that haphazard way. To some he has given one gift; to others the gift of leadership; to more the gift of music, or organisation, of writing. These gifts perhaps form a scale in human values, but for the running of society the shoemaker, the crossing-sweeper, the baker are all as important as the prime minister.

The running of the local community demands certain gifts. Those that have these gifts have a duty to use them. They will be asked, when the Master returns, to account for their use of the talents. Woe betide them if they produce excuses, for what they have will be taken away from them.

We have among our Catholic body many men and women with these gifts. It may be difficult to use them. It will probably be hard. But used they must be or we will face our Maker knowing that we could have served him in serving our neighbour for his sake and that we were too cowardly, too lazy, too spineless to seize the opportunity.

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## AN OLD CONTROVERSY RECALLED

IN her admirable biography, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, Maisie Ward dwelt at some length on a notable controversy in which her hero was engaged at the beginning of the present century.<sup>1</sup> 'He was still', she says, 'writing every Saturday in the *Daily News*. Publishers were disputing for each of his books. Yet he rushed into every religious controversy that was going on, because thereby he could clarify and develop his ideas. The most important of all these was the controversy with Blatchford, Editor of *The Clarion*, who had written a rationalist Credo, entitled *God and My Neighbour*. In 1903-4, he had the generosity and the wisdom to throw open *The Clarion* to the freest possible discussion of his views. The Christian attack was made by a group of which Chesterton was the outstanding figure, and was afterwards gathered into a paper volume called *The Doubts of Democracy*'.

The writer of the present article read these sections of Miss Ward's book with special interest, for he remembers vividly the controversy

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<sup>1</sup> Sheed & Ward, 1945. pp. 140, 172-7, 180, 505.

to which they refer, and thinks it may be useful to describe it in some detail, as it has lessons for our own times. He has also another reason for recalling it.

At the end of the nineteenth and during the early years of the present century (in fact, up to the outbreak of the 1914-18 war), debates on religion held a high place in the attention of the reading part of our people. Books like Coulson Kernahan's *God and the Ant*, Marie Corelli's *Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, and other 'theological' novels, Hall Caine's *The Christian*, and numerous other fictional treatises on belief and unbelief, were read eagerly by thousands; while serious works on religion also had great or considerable circulations. W. H. Mallock was defending religion (and especially Catholicism) by a peculiar—though not really novel—method of his own (as presented especially in his *Religion as a Credible Doctrine*, published in 1903); the method, namely, of recognising that the tenets of science and faith cannot be reconciled intellectually but that we can believe both by admitting that 'for our minds the ultimate nature of things is inscrutable', and therefore we may accept *apparently* contradictory beliefs simultaneously. Arthur James Balfour was defending faith by a somewhat similar though not identical theory, by showing that physical science is as fraught with 'mysteries' as is theology. In short, the last years of the nineteenth century and the first of ours were characterised by wide popular interest in religious controversy. In such an atmosphere the occurrence of 'the *Clarion* controversy' was only to be expected—though in certain circles at the time it aroused a rather unreasonable degree of dismayed astonishment. Some 'comfortable' religious folk seemed to imagine that theological debate could be confined to 'polite upper circles', and were angrily surprised when it extended to the 'workers'!—although they should have remembered that it had been so also in the days of Bradlaugh.

Robert Blatchford (who for about seven years had been a soldier, rising to the rank of sergeant) left the *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*—on the staff of which he had worked after leaving the army—owing to its then proprietor's objection to his writing Socialist articles. That was in 1891, and at the end of that year he and a few colleagues, 'with a capital of £400, of which £100 was borrowed',<sup>2</sup> founded a weekly paper, the *Clarion*, to propagate idealistic Socialism. It had an immediate success, and in 1893 Blatchford supplemented it by publishing a book entitled *Merrie England*. Written in a homely, crisp style of vigorous, simple, 'Saxon' English, it was addressed to an imaginary 'John Smith, of Oldham, a practical

<sup>2</sup> R. B. Suthers in *Reynolds News*, 12th December, 1943.

working man'. 'I assume, Mr Smith', wrote Blatchford, 'that you, as a hard-headed practical man, would rather be well off than badly off. . . . And I assume that, as a humane man, you would rather that others should not suffer, if their suffering can be prevented'. 'The problem we have to consider is', he said, 'Given a country and a people, find how the people may make the best of the country and themselves'. In twenty-six chapters he expounded a system of Socialism as a substitute for competitive Capitalism. The book's success was enormous: especially when, by a bold venture, it was issued in a penny edition: 'a shilling book of 206 pages for a penny!' says Suthers; who adds, '*Merrie England* made Socialists by the thousand. It added 10,000 to the circulation of the *Clarion* at once'. Later Blatchford published a supplementary book, *Britain for the British*. 'At present', he wrote, 'Britain does not belong to the British; it belongs to a few of the British, who employ the bulk of the population as servants or workers. . . . This state of affairs is contrary to Christianity, is contrary to justice, is contrary to reason. . . . The remedy for this evil state of things—the *only* remedy yet suggested—is *Socialism*'. The book was written in a high, idealistic, though practical style, and began with a quotation from the Litany of the Church of England: 'That it may please Thee to strengthen such as do stand; and to comfort and help the weak-hearted; and to raise up them that fall; and finally to beat down Satan under our feet', etc. It will be seen, then, that up to the publication of *Britain for the British* Blatchford had shown no antagonism to Christianity, but indeed had appealed to some extent to its moral sanctions; whilst many of his followers were earnest (Protestant) Christians. In 1903, came a dramatic development. In the *Clarion* Blatchford wrote a series of articles drastically attacking Christianity as both intellectually false and morally bad. It is worth mentioning here that shortly before this the Rationalist Press Association had been founded in London to publish popular literature of an 'advanced' type on philosophy and theology. Its series of *Sixpenny Reprints* of works by T. H. Huxley, W. R. Greg, Professor Tyndall, Ernest Renan, and others, attained a large circulation: especially so in the case of an English translation (*The Riddle of the Universe*) of *Die Welträthsel* of the Jena professor, Ernst Haeckel, who essayed to show that belief in God, immortality, and free will are 'three superstitions' to be eradicated in the name of progress. There can be little doubt that the *Clarion*'s unexpected onslaught on Christianity was prompted largely by this new propaganda of the R.P.A., and that it greatly helped the success of that propaganda.

In November, 1903, Blatchford's *Clarion* articles were issued as

a book, *God and My Neighbour*: first at 2s. 6d., then at 6d. By 1911 it had run into fourteen editions. Written in his admirable style of simple, mellifluous non-Latinated English, it was eminently suited to appeal to a popular audience. 'My Christian friends', said its author in his Preface, 'I am a Socialist, and as such believe in, and work for, universal freedom, and universal brotherhood, and universal peace. And you are Christians, and I am an "Infidel"'. Well, be it even so. I am an "Infidel", and I now ask leave to tell you why'. In thirty chapters he discussed 'The Sin of Unbelief', etc. 'Civilisation', he said (p. 6) 'is built up of the "heresies" of men who thought freely and spoke bravely. These men were called "Infidels" when they were alive. But now they are called the benefactors of the world'. 'Is the Bible the Word of God?', 'The New Testament', 'The Resurrection', 'Christianity before Christ', 'Free Will and Determinism', rapidly he surveyed all. His ultimate conclusion was (pp. 190 and 199): 'I oppose the Christian religion because I do not think the Christian religion is beneficial to mankind, and because I think it is an obstacle in the way of Humanism'; and 'This is not a humane and civilised nation, and never will be while it accepts Christianity as its religion'.

It is not possible here to go into the arguments of *God and My Neighbour*—which were the usual arguments of contemporary Rationalism, derived from T. H. Huxley, Tyndall, Samuel Laing, Edward Clodd, Matthew Arnold, Haeckel, Grant Allen, Cotter Morison, Herbert Spencer, *The Golden Bough*, John M. Robertson, etc. One cardinal fact, however, should be noted: Blatchford's ideas of Christianity were based entirely on old-fashioned 'Bible-only' Protestantism. In his articles and his books there is not a single sign of any awareness of even the mere existence of the Catholic position, with its settled philosophy, theology, and apologetics. The great historic Church of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Suarez, Bellarmine, never seems to have presented itself to his consciousness. His attack was solely on Victorian Protestant fundamentalism: or, rather, it was so *directly*, though of course the Catholic Faith was assaulted by implication, it being the teacher of most of the assailed doctrines. It is, however, remarkable that an able popular writer could essay to attack Christianity and yet ignore 'Rome'! The explanation no doubt is found in the numerical fewness of Catholics in this country (though, even then, Blatchford should have read Newman, Manning, Faber, and other well-known Catholic writers); but, while this may serve as an explanation, it is no real excuse. Failure to take cognisance of the ancient Church, powerful still in many countries, was a sad proof of mental insularity.

One of the outstanding features of *God and My Neighbour* was its advocacy of Determinism, or the denial that we possess free will. Blatchford regarded Determinism as not only logically true, but also morally and sociologically beneficial. His argument was twofold: (a) 'I have said several times that man could not and cannot sin against God. . . . *If God is responsible for man's existence, God is responsible for man's acts*' (p. 133; italics Blatchford's). Without any but passing comment on the somewhat clumsy character of the expression of this argument, it may be noted that it is a fallacy in that (taken by itself) it overlooks that man would be responsible for his own acts if he possessed freedom of choice. That, however, our author went on to deny: (b) 'Man is a creature of heredity and environment. He is by heredity what his ancestors have made him (or what God has made him). . . . From the moment of his birth he is what his inherited nature, and the influences into which he has been sent without his consent, have made him'. This argument, it is needless to emphasise, ignores the possibility that man may also have a spiritual soul.

Immediately after the issue of *God and My Neighbour*, Blatchford offered the hospitality of the *Clarion* for a presentation of the Christian case. The result was a series of lively articles which ran during six months, and were afterwards issued as a sixpenny book, *The Religious Doubts of Democracy*, edited by George Haw. These articles and the book were the occasion of Gilbert Chesterton's controversy alluded to by Maisie Ward. It is true that Chesterton's four articles were very good; but credit should also be given to able contributions by George Lansbury, the Rev. Charles L. Marson, the Rev. J. Cartmel-Robinson, Professor J. H. Moulton, Dr W. St Clair Tisdall, the Rev. J. G. Adderley, and others. Again it is remarkable to note that no one seemed to think of enlisting an exponent of the Catholic view!

In 1905 Blatchford wrote in the *Clarion* another series of articles, devoted exclusively to an exposition of Determinism, and also published subsequently as a book: *Not Guilty: A Plea for the Bottom Dog*. The argument was that we are solely products of heredity and environment, and have no free will; therefore all punishment or blame is fallacious; that wrongdoers are to be pitied and helped as sufferers from disease; and that it would be a beneficial reform to replace the old theory of vengeance with a reformative treatment. The book was very eloquently and persuasively written, but was vitiated by a fundamental fallacy; thus (p. 190): 'We may say that a man is free to act as he chooses. He is free to act as *he* chooses, but *he* will choose as heredity and environment cause *him* to choose. For heredity and environment have made him what he is' (italics

Blatchford's). We object at once, of course, that the word 'he' has no real meaning if man is a mere cog in a chain of physical cause and effect. Blatchford again ignored the possibility of our possessing spiritual souls.

Eventually, however, he appears to have abandoned the theory of Determinism, and to have replaced it by belief in the soul as understood by Spiritualism, which he took up after the death of his wife. 'Yes', he wrote (*News Chronicle*, August 1, 1933), 'undoubtedly Dr Housman is right. We may deny the autocracy of the brain. We are human through and through, our limbs are not automata. We feel with all our organs. We must respect the fellow in the cellarage. He is very much alive'. By 'the fellow in the cellarage' he evidently meant the free, intellectual soul. The London *Literary Guide and Rationalist Review* (August, 1929) said: 'Mr R. Blatchford has on many occasions explained his reasons for discarding his materialistic beliefs. . . . He will not consent to the reissue of *Not Guilty*, which does not apparently represent his present opinions'. He did not, however, return to Christianity. In a letter published in the *Literary Guide*, January, 1939, he said: 'Your clergyman hopes that I have turned Christian. I have not, and I don't understand how he remains one'. Except for a tenuous belief in Spiritism, he seems to have become completely agnostic: 'Sir Arthur Eddington,' he said, (*Psychic News*, April 6, 1935), 'said, some months ago, that our galaxy contains a hundred thousand million suns, and the universe contains a hundred thousand million galaxies. Do you ask me, a poor little forked radish with a head curiously carven, to construct a religion out of those appalling and incomprehensible immensities? You make me blush, brother'.

The general, as distinct from the individual, significance of the old *Clarion* controversy is that it was a logical development of the 'Reformation'. When infallible revealed authority is discarded, what limits can be set to scepticism? At the end of his *Companion to Mr Wells's 'Outline of History'* (London, 1926), Hilaire Belloc said: 'For the great mass of our modern English-speaking non-Catholic population the old doctrines have gone'. Belloc may be too much of a pessimist, but his statement is radically true. The revival of belief then is a task chiefly for Catholics. For what, however, does the Catholic Church exist but to tackle such problems?

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