

# New Blackfriars

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■ 'All that's over and done with, but I think the obsequies might at least show some respect.' The comment was cool, and kind in its way, for what had happened was the usual television send-up of the C of E – the adenoidal jokes, the false smiles and the flabby good cheer. And the lady novelist simply assumed, and thought that everyone else must assume, that 'all that' was faded and false. But, after all, it had meant something once: good taste is appropriate in funeral parlours, and you don't laugh at the dear departed as he lies there in his shroud.

'But this is still a Christian country.' Lord Devlin invokes the religious sense of the majority as the moral capital on which the law depends. There are bishops in the House of Lords, religious education in the schools, and the Queen's Speech always ends with the hope that God may bless the Government's endeavours. And a ceaseless flood of religious books pours into every literary editor's office ('who reads them all?' he wonders): endless epilogues and coffee-table discussions are there for the waiting millions, if they choose; all concerned to show that religion 'matters', that Christians 'care'.

Perhaps the lady novelist was right in a way she hardly intended. 'All that' so often means the establishment image, the inherited stance, the trooping of the ecclesiastical colours. And maybe that *is* over and done with, and religion can begin to speak. But where does it begin? Pope Paul's visit to India is at least a pointer to the answer. For its manifest disinterestedness, its simple affirmation of a presence rather than a power, cut through a forest of suspicion; suddenly it seemed that the still voice of compassion could be heard after all.

Which is not to say that charity frees us from the responsibility of reasoning. Here is one of the larger illusions: that a strategic retreat from the more exposed positions of belief will somehow lead to a milder co-existence in the plains below. And so the theologian becomes the humanist, italicized as it were; he can offer most of the secular hopes and perhaps give them holy sanctions as well. And in the interests of a 'dialogue' with the modern world the needle's eye expands so that camels of extraordinary dimensions can enter in.

But it doesn't even work, as the wreckage of so many brave experiments plainly shows. Clergymen in ton-up gear, priests at the factory bench, bishops in the witness-box defending Lady Chatterley, professors

of divinity being with-it in moral debate: at very different levels of seriousness the attempt has been made to touch the nerve of muddle and misery of a world that has so largely abandoned the sense of God. And the sense of God can only be recovered when religion appears to meet the needs, unformulated and unconscious as they often are, of men and women here and now. The experiments, however generous in intention, have perhaps assumed too little – not too much. If the Gospels are to be believed, you begin with the need for repentance: 'Repent and believe'. You believe, too, that an appeal so unambiguous is the one that will most likely be heard. And everything can be hoped for when a Pope can say in Council that the Church not only offers forgiveness but asks for it as well.

But how? What can repentance mean to those who regard the Church, religion of every sort, as a fossil on the beach, a part of history no doubt, but as little relevant to the real world as fossils are? Once more one returns to the astonishing wisdom of Pope John, already perhaps too ready a point of reference for every appeal for reform. Pope John could afford to be generous, to run risks, because he was of all men the most firmly rooted in the sense of God. He could make all the trappings seem profoundly unimportant, he could even seem to brush aside the huge inheritance of history and privilege and power. But he could only do this because he had the absolute confidence that 'by man's own efforts, and beyond the greatest expectations, we are being directed towards the fulfilment of God's higher and inscrutable designs'. (Inaugural address of the Second Vatican Council, October 11, 1962.) We begin with *where* we are, with *when* we are; and the virtue of hope means that a single act of compassion, a single word of truth, a single gesture of repentance, can encircle the earth. 'Over and done with'? The answer must be: 'It has hardly begun'.

■ *Social Compass*, the international review of socio-religious studies (30 Paul Gabrielstraat, The Hague, Netherlands), devotes its latest number to the situation in the British Isles. Professor T. Simey discusses 'The Church of England and English Society' and shows that 'the gulf between Church and people' is of long standing. He sees the present situation as encouraging, however, for 'whilst the Anglican theologian has become more aware of the significance of social behaviour, the sociologist has shown a desire to take part in an examination of the social realities of religious experience'. The need is urgent for fundamental changes in the institutional structures of the Church of England, for 'religion must be brought into an intimate and constructive relationship with life'. Dr Joan Brothers writes on 'Recent developments in the sociology of religion in England and Wales', and her admirably documented paper shows how much remains to be done to provide the

necessary material for useful study. 'There is a lack, on the one hand, of reliable and comprehensive statistics concerning religious affiliation on a national level; and, on the other hand, of intensive inquiries into the religious life of individual groups and sections of the community.' Dr Brothers insists on the necessity of religious bodies appreciating the value of sociological studies and also suggests that the sociologists should show a deeper understanding of the role and function of religion in the life of the community. John Highet provides a survey of Scottish socio-religious literature, and Dr Conor Ward a similar study of work in Ireland.

Of special interest is Anthony Spencer's account of the Newman Demographic Survey: 'Reflection on the birth, life and death of a Catholic institute for socio-religious research'. The issues raised by Mr Spencer's paper are serious ones and will be discussed in a future issue of *New Blackfriars*. It is enough at this stage to acknowledge the heroic work undertaken by Mr Spencer and his assistants during ten difficult years and to hope that 'death' need not exclude the hope of resurrection.

■ It's a sad winter for those who love English poetry and English letters in general. For although Dame Edith Sitwell and T. S. Eliot had both completed their major achievements some years before they died, both remained as major figures in English life, fascinating in the richness of their personality and history (who can forget the face and the voice of Dame Edith in her television appearances?) and notable for their example and encouragement to younger writers.

The achievement of Eliot was the wider, more profound and more solidly based. When he began to write, the century of romanticism, at least the century in which romanticism had the larger part in forming taste and sensibility, had come to an end in the afterglow of the Georgian poets, and the growing dissatisfaction with its worn-out modes was brought to explosion in the general crumbling of European culture in the First World War. Eliot's critical re-assessment of English poetry, the return to earlier models long out of fashion, his demonstration that intelligence and wit were not incompatible with feeling, did more than any other single man's achievement, to restore poetry and give it a new foundation and a new positive direction. His poems and his poetic language are now part of the tradition he helped to re-create. It would not be exaggerated to say that his work is now not only a part of English literature, but a part of the English language itself. Add to this his work as a publisher, the long list of younger poets beginning with Auden, whom Faber published and whose work would have taken much longer to make itself known without his influence and encouragement. A very great achievement for one man.

Edith Sitwell's work is, curiously, still more controversial. She entered

on the scene at roughly the same moment as Eliot and it would perhaps not be too fanciful to draw a very broad comparison between the course of her poetry and that of Eliot. For – leaving aside the experiments which she made in the music of English verse and which reached their height in the still-captivating *Façade* – her first ‘big’ work was *Gold Coast Customs*, a passionate indictment of social injustice and the corruption of fashionable society. This appeared in 1929, some years after *The Waste Land*, and though the imagery in which she transmitted her vision is very different, the underlying protest is not. Her second period of achievement was also called out by protest, this time against the horrors of the Second World War, and in particular by the atomic destruction of Hiroshima, protest against ‘the ultimate cold in the heart of Man’. In general these poems, with their metrical experiments in the long line, have not been regarded as so successful. But it was at this time that she wrote, for example, *Still Falls the Rain*, and the bitter *Lullaby*, and it may be that a sympathetic re-assessment of them is due. It is in these poems too that a stronger religious interest becomes apparent, not the philosophical and exploratory Christianity of the *Four Quartets*, but the profound sense, of one who has suffered much, that only Christ can be the answer to the sufferings of man.