

THE LAST BATTLE OF CHRISTENDOM

An diesem jüngsten Tag.

*Du hast ihn uns herabgesandt auf Erden,
Dass alle Völker, die lebendig sind,
Gesählt, gewogen und befunden werden
Und nichts mehr gelte, was nur Spreu im Wind.*

THE newest judging, weighing and numbering of the peoples differs from the trial described in this poem of the last war in its greater severity and in its terrible finality. There is no second chance for Christendom. The present conflict is not simply a period of testing from which Europe will emerge, purified or in a worse decline. It is the end of Europe, or it is the painful prelude to a glorious renewal. The very Christianity of Christendom is to-day in question. That is the tremendous theme of Mr. Christopher Dawson's newest, most carefully written and most readable book.¹

The essence of the problem is stated squarely. This is neither a war of nations in the old imperialist style, nor even a war of ideologies in the crude sense of Democracy *versus* Fascism. 'The conflict which threatens to destroy civilisation to-day is not a conflict of race or culture, or even ideology. It is a conflict of the naked will to power which has swallowed up all the ostensible ideological issues: the racial issue of Aryan *versus* Semite, the social issue of Communism *versus* Fascism, and the international issue between the supporters and opponents of the League of Nations.'

The newest enemy is anti-human, as well as anti-European and anti-Christian. Secular liberalism, though opposed to the main tradition of European Christianity, stands now on the side of the angels. The ideals of justice and freedom to which it paid tribute were withdrawn from the Christian atmosphere where they had previously flourished, but they did not for that reason lose their validity. Liberalism, standing for freedom against state domination, is still a power which resists the breakdown of the old order; it cannot deny freedom without ceasing to exist, nor the Christian moral values without becoming inhuman. So long as Liberals hold power it remains possible to defend with their laws the very things of the spirit which they deny.

'Our masters then were still at least our countrymen. For 'the old Liberalism with all its shortcomings had its roots deep in the soil of Western and Christian culture. . . . But the new collectiv-

¹ *The Judgement of the Nations.* (Sheed and Ward, 8s. 6d. net).

ism is out of line with the whole Western development. It has more community with the oriental monarchies—with Persia and Assyria and Egypt, with the spirit that inspired the building of the Pyramids and the Great Wall of China.' The new tyranny is hostile even to that Hellenic civilisation in which Christianity was nurtured, and in whose cultural forms the Christian outlook has been expressed.

The situation in which we now find ourselves is due to the progressive destruction of the Christian element—which has been the driving force—of our civilisation. The process of disintegration is also one of secularisation. The destructive forces were there from the beginning and only kept in check with difficulty in the medieval Christian order; they became more unruly and were partially successful in the attack on authentic Christianity at the Reformation, and they found a new expression in liberal humanitarianism. Now they have overleaped all restraints and, aided by a totalitarian philosophy originating in Russia and hostile to the whole Western tradition, have rejected even the values to which Liberalism still held. The vaunted progress of Western man under Liberalism, the achievements of unfettered science, the penetration of 'free' thought, the new discoveries of psychology, have all been used to enslave mankind under the tyranny of totalitarian powers. It is perfectly consistent with this situation that the country in which this anti-European amoral political terrorism was first exemplified should be allied with the nations where the liberal spirit still prevails and fighting for its own existence against a common totalitarian enemy. 'The new evil is no longer necessarily associated with Communism. On the contrary, it spreads by opposition even more than by imitation. As soon as men decide that all means are permitted to fight an evil, then their good becomes indistinguishable from the evil that they set out to destroy.'

As Christianity has been 'the dynamic element in the whole process of change' in Western Europe, it must be the governing principle of any renewal. Man's great achievements of the past century, already being used by the makers of destruction, will bring him only to misery and death, if they are not harnessed to the Christian cause, spiritualised and made to serve the purpose of the new humanity reborn in Christ.

Restoration must be entire. Every element of good which remains in our civilisation must be sought out and embodied in a united movement towards a goal that transcends anything yet achieved in Christian Europe. We can, for instance, be glad that Liberalism still permits religion to have an influence through the in-

dividual on economic life, but to continue to regard religion as a merely private and personal matter will be fatal. Society will break in upon private lives, either to mechanise and absorb them into the material process and thus destroy religion or it will exploit for destructive purposes the irrational forces which previously were controlled and directed by religion to higher ends. Society itself must be subjected to a new planning under the influence of religion.

Here the Catholic thinker is in some difficulty. His whole impulse is to point to the Church which of its nature must be the most vital element in any society and which historically has transformed Europe and made the civilisation we are struggling to maintain. But will her mission be accepted by a divided Christendom, by men who are no longer even Christians and think in secular terms? 'The Church speaks a different language to that of the modern world, which has lost the very idea of theology . . . The great fundamental realities—the truths on which everything depends and which are more real than the things we see and touch—are dismissed as words, mere pious formulas that have no relevance to modern life.' We are restricted therefore to taking what opportunities are offered of breaking down prejudice, of putting men in a receptive state, open-minded and generous-hearted, for the coming of the Spirit.

There must be a return to Christian unity, which means inevitably a return to the visible Catholic Church. And no Catholic can doubt that the main distribution of the gifts of the Spirit will come through that Church, while the saints who will lead the revival will be its faithful children. Nevertheless, Mr. Dawson is not only tactful but absolutely right in implying that, for the individual, membership of the invisible community of the saints through faith and charity is more important than external allegiance to the Roman Church which is its visible embodiment. He prefers to seek unity in the first place where it is most easily discoverable and, through common social action, to move towards unity in faith. Personal freedom and freedom of association must be maintained and the principle of vocation asserted within each community, a vital universalism created within the community of nations. But all these things are only possible under the influence of the Spirit and as part of a genuinely Christian order. For they are set up against the 'mystery of lawlessness,' itself a profoundly spiritual and evil power.

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He would be a bold man who would set forth an alternative solution to this carefully worked out plan. He would be stupid who

denied its general validity or questioned the accuracy of Mr. Dawson's analysis of the breakdown of Western civilisation. But there does appear to be some reason to doubt if the attitude we are urged to take up towards Christians who are not of our faith is entirely satisfactory.

The rigorist view of the problem of Christian co-operation is severely criticised. Those who hold it are said to be so struck by the divisions among Christians that Christianity appears to them to be a mere name covering a diversity of religions. The theory 'concentrates its attention so much on the question of authority and ecclesiastical order that it ignores or undervalues the importance of the common beliefs, the common moral values, the common religious traditions and the common sacraments and forms of worship that exist in the midst of the religious divisions of the Christian world.'

If Mr. Dawson is speaking of what is common to large numbers of *individuals*, it would certainly be wrong to under-estimate these things, but since co-operation is between Christian bodies it does not seem that this is the meaning of the word 'common.' Yet how can we speak of beliefs which are held in the same sense in the Catholic Church and in any of the major Christian bodies in England, or of sacraments other than baptism recognised by any two of these groups? There are more common moral values, but these also the pagans hold. The moment we go beyond commandments accepted even by non-Christians division arises, as, for instance, in the question of Birth Control, where Anglican leaders show themselves ready to accept ruinous distinctions between the married and unmarried states. Is there any unanimity about belief in the Divinity of Christ even, which, Mr. Dawson reminds us, is the fundamental criterion of Christianity?

And does not all this talk of common beliefs and a fundamental criterion obscure the unique claims of the Church and lead to the erroneous impression that it is possible to find a lowest common denominator as a basis for united action? These are the thoughts which have led the 'rigorists' to hesitate, not about co-operation, but about the outlook of those who wished to take part in it. Their attention was concentrated not on mere human authority, but on the *divine* authority which they knew to reside by Christ's guarantee in His visible Church; and they sought to maintain the order with which He had endowed it.

Not dissimilar was the attitude of those ecclesiastics in the past who appreciated fully the social causes of heresy and schism, which Mr. Dawson rightly stresses, but who did not consider even the

noblest desire for national unity to justify the denial of Christ's unity in the Blessed Sacrament.

On questions of fact the layman is generally a more competent observer than the theologian, but it appears even from this book that Protestantism is not so powerful that we need to approach its adherents and ask for their co-operation as if we were doubtful, at least, about our strength. Twenty years ago a great theologian of generous outlook, Père Sertillanges, asked: 'Is not Protestantism running into nothingness to-day?' and asserted the principle: 'Putting aside for the moment every consideration of persons, she (the Church) says of these things, schisms, heresies, unbelief, that they are horrible; that they cannot be deplored and condemned enough; that they must be combated with all the power of the truths they slight, of the goods that they wish to destroy, and of the humanity that ought to live by these truths and these goods.'²

We can no more look tranquilly on the teaching of error than we can fail to rejoice at the extensive remnant of Catholic truth which individuals still possess. The one fact does not, however, help co-operation nor does the other hinder it. The basis of co-operation must lie not so much in the intellectual sphere as in the will, in 'universal love, the compendium and most general expression of the Christian ideal.'

Following the lead of the Pope, as Mr. Dawson does, we certainly must co-operate with other men of goodwill, most of all with those who share our love for Christ. But always there will be some pain in the presence of error; the constant failure to reach unity even on social problems and on principles of natural law must create some friction between those who follow the light of reason, aided by the occasional and extraordinary impulse of the Holy Ghost, and those who rest securely in the authoritative teaching of the Church where the guidance of the Spirit is granted as by right. The spirit of charity will make it possible to overcome these difficulties, as it will enable us proudly to maintain the claims of the Church without diminishing our personal humility or causing offence to those who wish to collaborate in her mission as from the outside.

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² *The Church* (London, 1922), p. 259.