

BLACKFRIARS

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AUTUMN BOOK SUPPLEMENT.

PROGRESS FROM TRADITION

The myth of human progress has been, for the time, exposed. Human butchery, torture and the attempted extermination of nations are not horrors of a remote past; of recent years men and women have been burnt alive for their Catholicism, or perhaps also for their Communism—the passage of years having added one efficient improvement, that of petrol. Even Mr. H. G. Wells has had to modify his view concerning the coming of Mr. Superman, and instead his vociferous desires for the bombing of Rome have seen their fulfilment. Total war working out its logical conclusions is forced to repudiate culture and humanity as much as does civil war. Perhaps one day we shall see a tablet erected commemorating the day on which Rome shook under her first H.E.'s: 'Here lies the Myth of Progress. Neither Culture nor Religion may obstruct the march of war, a war to crush two enemies of European culture. If these bombs blasted Mussolini from his seat no matter the risk to the Birth of Venus in the Museum of the Baths of Diocletian or to the basilica of San Lorenzo and his martyred bones.'

An age that has begun to despair of the future will be thrown back on the past. While we vainly attempt to hold the future together with ideas and mental pictures, with schemes, plans and reports of many high-flown committees, we shall be driven to the past and above all to tradition for a chain strong enough to wind round and support the crumbling present. A flourishing culture and civilisation thrive unconsciously on their ancient tradition; their traditional worship of God is the sap of unity and the family customs and sagas join together religious and civil life; these are the two roots that are accepted unquestioningly, out of sight but bringing life. But when branches and trunk are blasted we must dig and expose the roots to find life. The unearthing of the past as a source of life for the present is beset with difficulty. We cannot graft the sickly present on a dead root of the past. If we attempt to impose past standards unaltered on the present we shall be rightly dubbed reactionaries of the most deadly type. We must take heed lest we substitute enfeebled 'progress' with mortifying 'reaction.' Hence the need to study the 'Meaning of Tradition' and its relevance in culture and religion, discussed in the present issue of BLACKFRIARS.

But the fundamental question is whether we have to-day the strength to maintain the balance between tradition and attempted reconstruction. Although the accepted idea of progress has little truth in it, since every man is born into sin and bears about with him the wounds of Adam's fall, there is progress in consciousness and analysis of human experience, as Mr. Gerald Heard has shown in his *Man the Maker*. With the increase of what might be called the articulation of experience a greater power of co-ordination and organisation is demanded. As nation, tribe and family become more self-conscious and thereby separated, the need for an international power to hold the separating units together becomes increasingly imperative.

A typical example of this process and its consequent necessities occurs in the modern Christian's spiritual inheritance. There are two different traditions which have reached the point when they must be bound together in harmony or fall apart into a permanent state of war. The more recent spiritual trends, mainly post-reformation but representing a continuous and normal growth from St. Bernard and St. Augustine, regard primarily the relationship of the solitary soul with God. It is a self-conscious, individualistic type of piety and it concentrates on the human 'personality' of our Lord. It is expressed in a perfect form in the devotion to the Sacred Heart, and finds special support in the more mystical writers of the later Middle Ages. It may be seen too in the adoration of our Lord in the Blessed

Sacrament, leading sometimes to untheological devotions as that to the Prisoner of the Tabernacle. Thirdly, it may be seen in an increased desire for social betterment on Christian principles. Mainly through historical accident and the reaction to heretical attack, this individualistic type of devotion tended to supersede the older tradition, which was more direct and objective. The spirituality of St. Augustine, for example, is permeated with the doctrine of the Mystical Body, it is profoundly liturgical and therefore communal, part of the public work, the work for the public on common good, the work for the common God and Father of us all. That tradition regarded our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament primarily as the food of the soul, the nourishment (on the Mystical Body), the means of worshipping God, and only secondarily as the immediate object of adoration. Finally, the older tradition regarded the works of mercy as being inspired by personal charity, the sick, the poor and the outcast being cared for by those who gave themselves out of love for the particular persons in trouble; social betterment was the result of this love of Christian for Christian.

Now at the present stage of development we have reached the time for a conscious reunion of these two traditions. The instruments are to hand—the Liturgical Movement with its insistence on the doctrine of the Mystical Body, the practice inaugurated by Pius X of giving the Daily Bread daily to the Church's children, the important Social Action of the Church. These may hark back to the earliest tradition, but they must take into account also the later if they are to preserve their balance and not topple over into mere reaction on the one side or novelty on the other. Liturgical enthusiasts are too prone to reaction and tend to despise the vast store of piety gathered by the more individualistic harvesters in God's fields. The social reformers are prone to a revolution that pushes responsibility from their own shoulders on to the State, so that the objects of their action become 'hands' or 'cases,' or simply a 'class,' not Christian persons begging for Christian sacrifice.

The Spirit needed to create a unity out of these various strands from the past must be more powerful than ever before, if this work is to lead to a deeper and at the same time more comprehensive human living than ever before. The time is ripe for an unparalleled synthesis in all these spheres of human life both natural and supernatural. Hegel would say it is inevitable. Unhappily there are as yet no signs that that Spirit has begun to brood over our chaos. We are none of us great enough for the vocation of our time.

EDITOR.