

‘Lift up a Living Nation’: The Political Theology of Georges Bernanos

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‘Lift up a Living Nation’: I take these words of G.K. Chesterton’s well-known hymnic poem, ‘O God of Earth and Altar’, as a suitable emblem for a study of Bernanos’ ‘polemical’ works. In fact, the three stanzas of Chesterton’s divine apostrophe — called simply, in the *Collected Poems*, ‘A Hymn’ — perfectly match the spirit and content of Bernanos’ political writings.¹ Nor is this entirely surprising, for the two writers belong to a stream of intellectual reflection and spiritual endeavour in early twentieth-century England and France, where writers in a Catholic tradition (both Anglo-Catholic and Roman) sought to envisage and commend a new Christendom, on the basis of what was best in the English and French *anciens régimes* as well as humanity and the Gospel — all with the aim of countering and overcoming that extended cultural and political crisis which in England opened with the Edwardians and ended with the Second World War and in France coincided with the Third Republic and the division of the country between Vichy and the Occupied Zone. It is noteworthy that Chesterton’s ‘hymn’ was first published in *The Commonwealth* for November 1907² — the very year of Bernanos’ earliest published work, seven short stories on the themes of kingship, childhood and heroic death in the Royalist monthly *Le Panache*.³

The prayer in Chesterton’s poem addresses a God who is named at once for the land (‘earth’) and for the traditional cultus of a Christian people (‘altar’). It speaks of the faltering of a political élite, and the disorientation of the masses; the excessive power of money (‘the walls of gold’) and the internal division that follows on party conflict (‘the swords of scorn’). It warns against being cowed by terrorists, or misled by the mendaciousness of politicians and propagandists, especially when they tell the ‘cruel’ what it comforts the latter to know. It fears above all the degradation of honour and chivalry. It seeks the organic unity of ‘prince and priest and thrall’ in what is, evidently, an order at once monarchical, ecclesial and agricultural (or at least one supposes the latter from the use of an Old English word for a serf, though there may be a reference to modern industrial ‘wage-slavery’ as well). The social bond that results

will be truly solidary ('bind all our lives together'), both exigent ('smite us') and redemptive ('save us all'). Chesterton pleads for the advent of a new Christian order animated by a spirit of liberty ('Aflame with faith, and free'). All of these themes are profoundly bernanosian.

But while the 'Edwardian cultural crisis'⁴ and the politics, both domestic and foreign, of inter-war Britain throw light on the neo-Christendom ideals of Chesterton (and Belloc), the specificities of modern French history, society and literature are quite indispensable for an understanding of Bernanos. Chesterton was steeped in the work of English writers, in Chaucer, Cobbett, Dickens, and his prose and poetry are, among other things, fantastic celebrations of English places and English people. But he never wrote – nor can one easily imagine him writing — a book entitled 'The Spiritual Vocation of England', to match Bernanos' *La Vocation spirituelle de la France*.⁵ Chesterton's most visionary statement of the destiny of a Christian England is his Alfredian epic poem, 'The Ballad of the White Horse.' But the issue in that poem is the struggle of a Christendom (which happens, contingently, to be the author's own) with the forces of Barbarianism, ancient and modern. Despite their repertoire of common themes, and the congruence of their theological, cultural, political and socio-economic aims, Chesterton and Bernanos differ in that the first is a prophet of the mission of Christendom at large whereas the other is (let us put it kindly) more sensitive to the variety of Christendoms in the plural, among which pride of place belongs — by dint of predestining supernatural vocation — to the task of France. I shall return to the significance of this difference in my conclusion.

It might be thought strange that a novelist so concerned with subjectivity, interiority and openness to God and his grace towards individual persons should have produced what can without too much straining be called a 'political theology' at all. For the distinction — hardly a fine one, more a wedge than a hairline — between a mystical subjectivism and a theology of liberation has been treated — not unnaturally — in later twentieth-century Catholic thought as very much an 'Either/Or'. Thus in a celebrated dispute in German divinity, the father of Catholic political theology, Johann Baptist Metz, did not propose to add the occasional nuance to Karl Rahner's theology of the human person as 'transcendental subject' but, dismissing Rahner's point of departure as thoroughly ill-chosen, to start all over again. Bernanos, however, answers the seeming alternatives with an emphatic 'Yes, please!', and surely what comes to light here, over against the question of Kierkegaardian Lutheranism's Either/Or, is the authentically Catholic affirmation, Both/And. At the same time, the two genres of enquiry — into the

foundations of individual moral choice at that fine point where nature and grace meet in the soul's depths, and into the conditions of social flourishing of an anciently baptised people — retain their distinct formalities. They are, in the words of an Anglophone critic, 'linked but not identical'.

In the world of the novels, from *Star of Satan* [*Sous le soleil de Satan*] (1926) to the publication of *The Open Mind* [*Monsieur Ouine*] in 1943 and the posthumous appearance of *Night is Darkest* [*Un mauvais Rêve*] in 1950, the reader is faced with the most profound reflections of a man at the limits of his experience and with characters whose actions lead them to a confrontation with the transcendent, where either the crucial choices of their lives have to be made or the inevitable consequences of those choices faced.

And, contrasting the range of Bernanos' novels with the space of his political writings, J.C. Whitehouse has this to say :

In these limit situations, the possibility of liberation, of full humanity, is of a rather different kind from that suggested, sometimes with nobility and sometimes evoked by a bitter picture of its absence, in the polemical essays. In the latter, it is fundamentally the liberty and dignity of man amongst his fellow-men which is the issue. In the novels, it is the liberty of a person to be more fully and intensely himself. The two are linked but not identical, although a social recognition of human freedom and dignity is a precondition of the fullness and not the fullness itself.⁶

Both enterprises – the novelistic, the polemical – find their unity also in the order of grace, for in analogically related ways individuals and societies can collude with their own degradation in sick love-affairs with evil, or be drawn towards goodness in finding desirable the life of sacrifice characteristic of the saints. And just as the rejection of grace on the plane of the individual, by sealing up at source the transformation of desire breeds psychological distortion, so at the level of society, the refusal of baptismal vocation by a society formed under Christendom produces perfectly palpable political ills.

Pre-disposed to such a view of things by his upbringing in a traditionally-minded, Catholic and Legitimist family under the Third French Republic, the young Bernanos found these prejudices partially confirmed by the analyses of the malaise of that Republic in the writings of Edouard Drumont and Charles Maurras. Drumont, whose general reputation rests, unsavourily, on one work, *La France juive* (1886), Bernanos would never repudiate. His first book-length venture in

Bernanos' relations with his other *maître à penser*, Charles Maurras, were much more troubled. The creator of an atheistic case for the restoration of the French monarchy and the reestablishment of the French Church – a feat of thought performed with the assistance of the social Positivism of Auguste Comte but reading for Comte's universal *humanité a national patrie* – Maurras' *empirisme organisateur* ('Purposeful Empiricism') seemed to as yet unadverted Catholics a gift as timely as it was unexpected and on both accounts to be acclaimed as Providential. Maurras called for a unification, on the basis of an authoritative religion and its chief civil magistrate, the Christian prince, of a multitude of individuals each otherwise capable of manufacturing their own ultimate good, and classes, professions, communities, each more than willing to identify their own sectorial interest with that of the social whole. And what was this if not the statement at the level of social philosophy of a common good Catholic Christianity – not least in its Thomistic form – could itself affirm theologically, in the light of divine revelation?¹¹ Now Bernanos did not require Maurras to teach him his need of his Catechism or *La monarchie très-chrétienne*. What Maurras was able to lay out for him, however, from his own Comtian resources, was a sophisticated defence of the traditionalist instinct. Only if 'the linkage between man past and man present' becomes 'progressively more important over time than that between contemporaries' can the building of the 'great human edifice' be assured,¹² and, one may add, the *anomie* of modern democracy with its inappropriately exclusive concern with the voters of the present be overcome. Just the same preoccupation with enfranchising the departed was exercising Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* (1908) where it appears as the 'democracy of the dead'¹³ – though Chesterton's love of liberty, like Bernanos', takes him far from the 'Helleno-Latin' ideal of unitary order in Maurras. Bernanos never abandoned his criticism of the democracies whose imposition of universal conscription in the First World War had shown them, he thought, to be as potentially totalitarian as the 'plebiscitary authoritarianisms' of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Franquist Spain, and the Leninist dystopia in the East. But he was disabused of Maurras' charms not by Pius XI's condemnation of L'Action française (he considered that a further dose of the supine and counter-effective Republicanism of Leo XIII) but by the successive blows of Maurras' revelation of softness towards the dictators, acceptance of Munich and finally support of the dishonourable régime of Vichy with its secret conviction that some kind of Nazi order was in Europe to stay. For how could a lover of St Louis make his peace with tyranny? In *La France contre les robots*, Bernanos would deem the punishment of Victor

Emmanuel III for his conduct over Mussolini (and Ethiopia) 'necessary for the honour of the monarchy'.¹⁴

It was the dishonouring of the name of Christian civilisation by the methods used by Nationalists for its defence in the Civil War in Spain which awoke Bernanos, in his Majorcan exile, to the enormities of which the Catholic Right was patient.¹⁵ This did not entail, however, a capitulation to the secular Left or even – and this is the capital point – an accommodation with Christian Democracy. A democracy for Bernanos is a regime which can in any crisis produce a dictatorship: a 'Christian' version of the same, by denying the need for a spiritual élite of heroic yet childlike saints,¹⁶ only succeeds in setting Christians themselves at loggerheads with their own truth.

There is no true unity among peoples, as among individuals, without a common idea; and it is important that this common idea be placed as high as possible, so that it can be seen from furthest away. In setting it too low, on the pretext of rendering it more accessible, the best are debased and the mediocre confirmed in their mediocrity. An elevated idea does not need to be grasped by each citizen at every stage; it is enough for it to be in the air, to act directly or indirectly on consciences.¹⁷

In the 'harmonious city' (a phrase of Charles Péguy) where the Beatitudes begin already to be social reality, privileges are re-enacted as duties. That to Bernanos' mind, sifting out the gold from the dross of the Revolution that swept away the *ancien régime*, was the real significance of the change of heart that overcame the Estates-General in 1789, and of the invitation issued by 'Henry V' (the Comte de Chambord) in the 1870s to a new, costing moral and spiritual collaboration by all classes. If it struck politologists as infantile, so much better in a world where politics simply as politics are folly, and childhood under grace is Eden restored.

Bernanos' belief that the 'vocation' of France was to be not a Christendom, but the heart of Christendom and so of humanity (a claim which, transferred to England, would have struck Chesterton, despite his multiple points of contact with Bernanos' polemics, as risible pomposity) did not derive from even a highly qualified kind of racialism. As he put it, 'nations are less fragile than races because they are rich with diverse and sometimes contradictory heredities.' By virtue of a supernatural mission working on a particular natural participation in the divine creative action (and not through *racial* inheritance, then), French Christendom has proved able to unite in art, thought, action, 'the severest disciplines of the mind to the fierce independence of the heart'. *Can* the

historically informed theological eye detect the operation of corporate charisms by which the nations of Christendom, and not simply their saints, public and private, exercise their missions? At a time when, under the flag of St George, an English nationalism seems to be stirring, the question is not without relevance this side of the Channel. But should we speak of 'Christendoms' at all? For Bernanos, 'if all Christians were exceptional, Christendoms would not be needed'. As it is, however,

A Christendom of average Christians, with its particular disciplines, its lawful political fidelities, its esprit de corps, is worth infinitely more than average Christians taken in the mass.¹⁸

- 1 *The Collected Poems* of G.K. Chesterton (London, Methuen, 1937), 146–147.
- 2 Information kindly supplied by Mr Aidan Mackey of the G.K. Chesterton Library, at Plater College, Oxford.
- 3 J. Jurt, *Les Attitudes politiques de Georges Bernanos jusqu'en 1931* (Fribourg, Éditions Universitaires, 1968), 58–62.
- 4 J.Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis* (Hull, Hull University Press, 1984).
- 5 G. Bernanos, *La Vocation spirituelle de la France. Inédits rassemblés et présentés par J.-J. Bernanos* (Paris, Plon, 1985). True, the title given this collection was selected by Bernanos' son and literary executor, Jean-Loup. But it is absolutely fair to the book's content and typical of its vocabulary.
- 6 J.C Whitehouse, *Vertical Man: The Human Being in the Catholic Novels of Graham Greene, Sigrid Undset and Georges Bernanos* (New York and London, Garland, 1990), 41–42.
- 7 G. Bernanos, *La grande Peur des Bien-Pensants: Édouard Drumont* (Paris, Grasset, 1931), 88, 98, 126.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 441. On the varieties of 20th century 'Social Catholicism,' see A. Nichols OP, *Catholic Thought since the Enlightenment* (Pretoria, Univ. of South Africa Press and Leonminster, Gracewing, 1998), 90–94.
- 10 G. Bernanos, *La grande Peur des Bien-Pensants*, op. cit., 443.
- 11 M.Sutton, *Nationalism, Positivism and Catholicism. The Politics of Charles Maurras and French Catholics, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- 12 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 13 G.K.Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 62.
- 14 G. Bernanos, *La France contre les robots* (Paris, Plon, 1970), 30.
- 15 *Idem.*, *Les grands cimetières sous la lune* (Paris, Plon, 1938).
- 16 The theme of J.E.Cooke, *Georges Bernanos. A Study of Christian Commitment* (n. p.Avebury, 1981).
- 17 G.Bernanos, *Lettre aux Anglais* (Rio da Janeiro, Atlantica, 1942), 223.
- 18 *Ibid.*, *La Vocation spirituelle de la France*, op. cit., 43, 37, 212–213. On the general theme, see my *Christendom Awake. On Re-energizing the Church in Culture*, forthcoming from T & T Clark, Edinburgh, in 1999.