

THE REUNION OF CHRISTENDOM AND
THE SOCIAL PROBLEM¹

MAY I confess at the beginning of my paper that I have no particular qualification for speaking about the social problem; but for a long time I have been interested in the problem of how Christendom can be reunited again, how all the separated religious bodies or organisations can be brought to a realization of the truth that the unity and authority of the Catholic Church were appointed by Our Lord, and that all Christians must some day return to them. I believe that the two problems are very closely connected, and that the ultimate solution of the social problem depends upon the extent to which a solution is found for the problem of the Reunion of Christendom.

I suppose we should all agree that the social problem is primarily an economic one. The modern industrial system has brought an enormous increase in production, but it has also brought about a dislocation between production and distribution. The primary economic problem is how to get rid of this paralyzing dislocation. But this primary economic problem brings in its train a whole host of moral problems, because many of the attempts to solve the economic problem involve actions and policies which in one way or another come into contact with the moral law. Thus we get the tremendous problem of the gradual dehumanization of human beings by the conditions of life and work which seem inseparable from much of our industrial civilization, and with it the attendant problems of birth-control, sterilization, euthanasia, and so on.

To-day the world is full of attempts to solve the social problem. Some of these attempts are still only theories, some of them—Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism—are being tested by practical application. But any solution of the social problem must be based upon principles, and upon a view of life, and in the last resort there are really only two possible

¹ The substance of a paper read to the Parkinson Society, Birmingham, on January 16, 1936.

views of life. One regards this life as an end in itself, and will acknowledge no authority higher than human laws. The other regards this life as organized for eternal life, and in consequence acknowledges a higher law—God's law—upon which all human law must be based. For a time, states, like individuals, can make compromises between the two alternatives. Our own social order in England is officially based upon God's law, but we are in process of making the compromise by introducing laws and policies which are contrary to God's law. A. P. Herbert's novel *Holy Deadlock* illustrates how this compromise works out in marriage. In the future the issue between these two views of life will become more and more clear, and a definite choice will have to be made between them.

Now look at the various elements in our contemporary life upon whom the necessity of making this choice will fall. We can classify them as they classify the members of the French Chamber of Deputies. On the extreme right you have Catholics, a small homogeneous group with clearly defined theoretical principles, and with them a group of about the same size composed of orthodox Christians from other religious bodies; Christopher Dawson and T. S. Eliot might stand as the representatives of these. On the extreme left you have a small homogeneous group who reject the whole idea of God and the supernatural, and are bent upon building up a social system which is Godless in the sense that it is founded upon human law as its highest authority; Bertrand Russell is the type of this group. Between these two extremes come the great majority of English people. They are in a state of indecision, generally quite unconscious. They have not as yet been called upon to make any definite choice between pagan naturalism and Christianity. But they live in an atmosphere which is increasingly pagan, they have no defence to put up against the disintegrating effect of that atmosphere, and in consequence the Christian traditions which really form the basis of their social life, but which have for years been little more than fossilized conventions, are being gradually sapped away.

In the case of some it is less so than in that of others. The

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middle right consists of people who still retain some practical belief in God—they go to church occasionally, at least for weddings and funerals, and they have their children baptized. But very little thought of God's law enters into their daily lives. The middle left consists of a great number of people who would be angry if you accused them of being atheists or even not Christians, but whose lives are an excellent example of practical atheism except for the fact that they are steeped in Christian tradition; and this unconscious tradition in the form of convention still guides their consciences and often makes their lives a cause of shame to those who are trying to lead explicitly Christian lives.

What is going to happen to this large central group of the middle right and the middle left as the choice between Christian supernaturalism and pagan naturalism becomes more clear, or if a sudden crisis arises, as it has done lately in Germany, which makes an immediate choice of one or other alternative imperative? They will naturally look to the extreme right and to the extreme left. On the extreme left they will find people with a definite plan for the reformation of social life, and the main plank in their platform is the abolition of the Christian God and the blotting out of all thought of a perfect life beyond this life. On the extreme right they will find Christianity, which means for them not a divinely instituted Church teaching them God's appointed way of shaping their lives in this world in such a way as to fit themselves for eternal life, but a chorus of jangling and discordant voices all shouting out different directions about what they ought to do. We Catholics, who have always thought of the Church as God's voice speaking to us here in this life, find it very difficult to put ourselves in the place of those who regard the Church as just one among many sects of Christianity, which merely puzzle you by telling you all sorts of different things about God and Heaven and Christ. And so Christianity has become for the multitude just a hobby—"religion is all very well for those who like it"—and they have long ago ceased to see it as the imperative demand which the Omnipotent God makes upon those whom He has created and set to live in this world.

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There can be no doubt that everywhere the forces of pagan naturalism and Christianity are gathering like two great armies for a tremendous struggle for the soul of the world. I think that struggle will take place principally in the economic sphere, and in order to face that struggle successfully the Christian army will have to be united. That is why I believe that the right solution of the social problem is very closely connected indeed with the problem of the Reunion of Christendom. If the Christian solution is to make a decisive impact on the world it will only be because Christendom is united in its witness as to what Christianity is. And that will never be until all Christians will consent to be reunited to the centre of authority—the authority of the Catholic Church.

The question of course occurs at once: all this may be very true, no doubt it is, but of what practical value is it? We as individual Catholics can do nothing about it. In the first place we have no conception of the form any ultimate reunion may take—that is the job of the theologians and the authorities to work out, *we* can do nothing about it. That is a very natural first reaction to the idea, and it is of course impossible for us to tell what form the reunion of Christendom will take. But it is not true that we as individuals can do nothing to prepare for the coming of reunion. Great movements depend for their beginnings upon the way in which the ground has been prepared to receive them. As individuals we can do a great deal to prepare the ground by fostering by every means within our power an understanding of sympathy and friendship between ourselves and non-Catholics. I do not mean of course by asking them out to tea or being on friendly terms with them in social intercourse—we do that quite well already. I do mean that we can promote a real and sympathetic understanding between ourselves and non-Catholics on fundamental questions of religion. But in order to do that we must know and understand ourselves very much more thoroughly than we usually do, and we must wake up to a situation which to the majority of us is quite unthought of.

Have you ever noticed your first instinctive reactions to

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any kind of religious discussion that may arise between Catholics and non-Catholics? Almost immediately you find yourself becoming pugnacious and argumentative, and if you ever look back upon an argument of that kind your honest summing up of it will probably be, "It did not do much good, we were merely arguing." That is absolutely true, and merely arguing generally means that neither you nor the person you were arguing with were really desirous of getting at the truth in each other's minds—you were not out for truth but for victory.

Now that instinctive hostility, that bristling pugnaciousness which we find in ourselves to such an acute degree when we get into religious controversy, and the cause of which we seldom think of, has a very interesting history. The Reformation split up Europe into two opposing camps. There were two armies, Catholicism and Protestantism, which began a long and bitter warfare entailing much bloodshed and persecution on both sides. Here in England Protestants for three and a half centuries harried and persecuted a Catholic minority first of all to the death, later by every sort of oppression. Across the channel in France Catholics persecuted Protestants in exactly the same way. That was the age of the wars of religion, and it lasted to the end of the seventeenth century. Bloodshed then ceased, but petty persecution continued and both sides settled down to watch each other like dogs that have been fighting, with hostility and suspicion and occasional growls of controversy. We are only just emerging from this stage and we have an inheritance of nearly 400 years of hatred and hostility behind us. When you argue about religion with a non-Catholic your mental outlook and instincts and all your reactions have been formed by this inheritance. Your subconscious mind is brooding on the horrible deaths of the martyrs, on the fines and imprisonments for religion, on the domination and oppression of the Church of England in its hey-day, on the heroism of Edmund Campion and the villany of Titus Oates. And your non-Catholic friend, though he may be innocent of all knowledge of history, has a mind darkened by the all unconscious influence of the burnings of Bloody Mary and

the iniquity of the Gunpowder Plot. That is not picturesque exaggeration—it is sober fact; we each belong to a tradition and our minds and mental atmosphere are formed all unconsciously by that tradition. We cannot help ourselves, and even a convert to Catholicism very soon finds that he has become part of the tradition he has adopted, and has lost the influence of the one he has left. We belong to different armies, we are enemies, and enemies fight for victory—they have no time to waste on charity or sympathy or an attempt to understand the opposite side.

But the period of warfare is coming to an end, and it is coming to an end because Christianity is being vigorously attacked by another army—the army of naturalism. That attack, which began nearly a hundred years ago, is causing among Christians of all kinds a steady drawing together and is forcing them to face facts; there is a new spirit in the air, a spirit of friendliness and the desire to see and understand what other people believe and why they believe it, a desire to get at the back of the faiths that other people hold, to enter into their minds and really to understand what their religion means to them. That spirit underlies the great Conferences for Reunion held on the Continent from time to time to which representatives of all the non-Catholic Churches go. We sometimes see slighting references and contemptuous comments on these efforts in our Catholic journals. The black and brooding inheritance of the past has not yet been purged even from the souls of our Catholic editors!—and until it is purged from their souls and from ours the work of Christ in bringing about Christian unity will continue to be hindered.

What practical part can the Catholic Church play in making this new spirit of friendliness her own? The officials of the Church, the Bishops, hold grave and responsible posts and if they took formal cognisance of these friendly advances there might be cause of harmful misunderstanding. The Catholic Church is in a different position from the other parts of divided Christendom. She knows herself to be the divinely appointed and authorized guardian and interpreter of Christ's revelation. Any action on their part which tended

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to obscure this truth would do more harm than good. The first step towards this great rapprochement must come from the laity, and here and there from priests where they can assist in an unofficial capacity. In England the movement has hardly begun, but on the Continent it is very much more advanced. It must take the form of individuals or small groups meeting in quite an unofficial way to discuss with perfect frankness and freedom and without the slightest desire to compromise, but with the sole intention of finding out the truth in what others, who are not of their own faith, hold. Such meetings will be doomed to failure unless both sides are determined to avoid controversy of the old win-a-victory type, and to concern themselves solely with the effort to learn what is true in the others' presentation of Christ's religion.

Can Catholics going to such meetings admit that Catholicism has anything to learn from non-Catholics, or can they confess that Catholics fail sometimes, and have failed badly in the past, to present the Catholic Faith to the world in its full truth and attractiveness, and so have been the cause of schisms in the past and still sometimes contributes to their perpetuation now?

They most certainly can. The Church of God is infallible. By this we mean that the full faith which Our Lord left with it, to guard and interpret, is always present in the Church to satisfy the needs of the faithful. But that does not mean that always and everywhere the Faith has been perfectly taught or perfectly apprehended and lived. At times there has been widespread slackness and worldliness which has reached even to the highest official places. Every instructed Catholic knows something of Alexander VI and the Renaissance Popes, and no one who has read even a little of the history of the Reformation can fail to be conscious that at that time there was evil in the Church which gravely needed the most drastic reform. To take one instance only—from the ninth century onwards the practice of frequent Communion among the laity grew less and less, till in 1216 the 4th Lateran Council was compelled to enact a law making yearly Communion a compulsory minimum. By the sixteenth century

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Holy Communion was confined to once a year—at Easter—for all lay people, and hardly any but monks and nuns went more frequently, and they very seldom.

This illustrates how, though the Faith remains always the same and can never fail because Our Lord has made His Church infallible, the ordinary application of the Faith to every-day needs depends on the energy and devotion of the pastors and the response of the flock. Where these are lacking, both the ordinary teaching and the apprehension of the Faith may become lifeless or one-sided and out of proportion. The most terrible disaster that ever overtook the Church of God was the great schism between East and West, the consequence of which was that the Church, through losing all the Eastern Orthodox, was confined almost entirely to Western Europe and became identified very closely with the Roman Empire of the West. One result of this was that it came to be looked upon more and more as a juridical institution, a highly organized society reproducing in itself the ordered and legal system of the Roman Empire, and the conception of the Church as a living organism, the Mystical Body of Christ, in which each individual is united with Christ and through Christ's life, fell into the background and was largely lost sight of. Both conceptions—juridical authority and organic life—were necessary, but the element of authority became over-emphasized at the expense of organic life.

The result was that all through the Middle Ages faith and conduct tended to become divorced. You could hold the Faith but it often had no effect upon your life. I am of course only indicating a tendency. The Church always taught the truth, but this teaching was imperfectly applied, thus producing a false tendency which showed itself in the fact that the laity had almost ceased by the time of the Reformation to go to the Sacraments save once a year. Then came a burst of new ideas at the Renaissance and the Church was ill prepared to receive them. If these new ideas and aspirations could have been transformed and absorbed into Catholic channels they would not have ended by causing the break up of Christendom, which in fact resulted, and there

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might have been no heresy and no schism to deplore.

These facts are all admitted by historians both Catholic and non-Catholic; there is no gainsaying them. But if we were a little more ready to admit them and to learn from them that we have a very great deal to understand about our non-Catholic neighbours, we might do much to disperse the mountains of misunderstanding and misconception which cut us off from each other. We are so often smugly self-satisfied, complacent and arrogant. We have every right to be proud and thankful to God that we are by His providence within the fold of the Church, where we can know all the truths of salvation if we try patiently and humbly to learn them. But we must remember that we carry a golden treasure and that we ourselves, as our predecessors in the Faith have been, are often very cheap earthenware. We are bungling users of a perfect instrument. I believe that the Pope's call to Catholic Action should urge us to get together in a positive and active effort to make contacts of sympathy and understanding in order that we may prepare the ground for the drawing together of all the separated parts of Christendom. This must come if Christians, true believers in Our Lord, are to stand together with closed ranks against the growing forces of pagan naturalism.

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