

CODE RELIGION

IF there is one section of the community which seems to remain impervious to Catholic influence, it is that body of educated Englishmen whose religion is little more than an ethical code. There have been, of late years, numbers of conversions from among the Anglo-Catholics, Congregationalists, and others of more or less definite belief; very few from among those supporters of institutional religion whose creed—if it can so be called—is limited to a certain standard of external conduct. Leaders of men, imbued with the best public school traditions, the section is a large and important one; we will typify it by the representatives we should find in a regimental Mess, or in the Ward Room of one of His Majesty's ships.

Such men have little opportunity of meeting with Catholic life: a mixed marriage here and there: a few Catholic friends in their own profession: a visit to a Catholic country, where they will continue to live very much their own life—a race apart; these are the sum total of their contacts. These separated brethren are worthy of more consideration and attention than they are accustomed to receive. Moreover, there is a defensive standpoint, and those Catholics who are drawn into the same state of life, and often, by force of circumstances, deprived of many of the helps of their religion, have to be on their guard lest they too become "code-religionists."

We use the word "code" in no deprecatory sense; the code of which we are speaking is a high one. Its chief characteristics are these: a very high sense of honour, respect for authority coupled with a keen sense of discipline, and the cult of efficiency. A certain background to all this is, of course, supplied by the established religion: Divine Service will be attended on Sundays, with perhaps a short form every morning. These things are regarded as an institution which, if not entering much into life, somehow or other is held to lend tone to the day's proceedings. At one end of the large hall which served as a kind of Quarter Deck at the Royal Naval College, Osborne, were inscribed in large brass

BLACKFRIARS

letters the words "Fear God, honour the King." The phrase almost crystallizes the attitude of institutional religion; it is an expression of orderliness; it "fits in." There are, of course, exceptions, but many are willing to forego even this institution; one is reminded of the unholy competition of the more junior officers to be unable to find room, when the weather was bad and Church had to be held on the Mess decks with only a limited number of chairs: there were more congenial occupations in the Gunroom. We have to look elsewhere for the guiding motive of behaviour; something that is deeper and more tenaciously held; the standard that a man will admit when pressed; the opposite "simply wouldn't be done."

Chief among these mysterious tenets is, undoubtedly, a high sense of honour. This will regulate quite punctiliously a man's dealings with his fellows; it will lead him to refrain from reminding another of his debts; make it an unheard of thing to cheat at cards, or read another's letters; such things would be mean and intolerable. Once given, he is confident that his word will be relied upon. It will appear in his more official attitude towards superiors and subordinates: thus, great care will be taken in questions of competence; recourse must be had to that person only whose province it is to deal with the matter; to "short circuit" an immediate superior is seen to be subversive of the right order of things. It will lead him to be just in his dealings with subordinates, particularly when they confront him at the defaulter's table: high authority has stated that "infinite pains" should be taken in this. In general, he will display a kindness that is never intended to be mistaken for weakness.

Very much bound up with this sense of honour is the sense of discipline, so obvious a necessity in any member of a fighting force. The late Lord Jellicoe has left on record his ideas on the principles of discipline,¹ and if we quote from these it is not because we consider their author an embodiment of Code Religion—we believe he was very much more—but because they give a certain setting to it; they are a

¹ *The Life of John Rushworth, Earl Jellicoe*, by Admiral Sir R. H. Bacon, pp. 511-513.

high expression of the ideals that are commonly held. Thus he says of the spirit of discipline: "It engenders a spirit of calmness in emergency." "Discipline renders a man more capable of facing the changes and chances of human existence. It produces a certain determination and firmness of character." "The man of discipline has learnt to resist, bear up, hold on, in spite of all difficulties. It teaches sentiments of confidence and self-respect, for, having learnt to obey, he has gone a long way towards learning to command. In a word, the object and the result of true discipline is to inspire men with bravery, firmness, patience, and with sentiment of honour. . . . In a well-disciplined force . . . each officer and man has conquered himself and is therefore in a fit condition to subordinate his own wishes and desires in carrying out the orders given to him, which, as he knows, are meant to forward the cause for which they stand." This does not produce an automaton, for "in approaching this matter it should be remembered that man has not only a body but also a spirit; and that therefore mere bodily or mechanical discipline, the discipline secured by precision of drill and the performance of evolutions is far from being wholly sufficient. . . . What is needed is something less obvious and tangible, but more real and more deeply ingrained; not only the practice of discipline but, still more, the habit and spirit of discipline."

The attitude towards efficiency may be summed up in the following: "All officers must be thoroughly disciplined and must be as efficient as possible so as to win the respect of their men. . . . Nothing is too trifling to take notice of; for, although a small thing may signify but little in itself, it is the accumulation of such, when left unchecked, that goes so quickly to show the want of supervision which spells a slack ship."

All this is as it should be, but it is a remarkable fact that some men whose lives exhibit an admirable conformity to these high standards should be found to be so lacking in ideals in other respects. Thus, what a man does on shore, or away from his ship, is very much his own business. While avoiding anything that would officially charge him with

BLACKFRIARS

“conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman,” he may fail in much with the feeling that such failures carry with them little or no stigma. There may sometimes be the ghostly presence of what has been called the Eleventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not be found out.” The chief criticism of Code Religion is its insufficiency.

This insufficiency need hardly surprise us. Without of course excluding the possibility of the presence of Grace, it would seem that the external principle of action among such men is no more than the Natural Law, that direction of reason in the practical order with a view to the Common Good; and the Natural Law may be obscured in more ways than one. True, a man may sometimes be actuated purely by personal ambition, but the unhappy state of affairs brought about by “promotion fever” and the unpopularity it evokes, leads one to think that the usual motive is genuinely higher, the good of the Service in general, and of the ship or unit in particular.

The Natural Law has a wide range. We are here in the realm of the practical intellect, the “dictator of conduct”: it provides us with dictates that are self-evident to everyone, such as the duty of honouring one’s parents, of not stealing, etc.: these do but correspond to those self-evident notions in the purely speculative order, such as “the whole is greater than the part.” Then there are certain things which after a more careful consideration are deemed by the wise to be of obligation; an example given is the maxim of respect for elders, “Rise up before the hoary head, and honour the person of the aged.”² We might note in passing that this maxim could well be placed at the head of the Table of Salutes and Marks of Respect found in Service manuals: wise men certainly deem it obligatory, as many a midshipman has doubtless found to his cost.

When the common good is always before a man, in almost tangible form, as is the case in a highly organized fighting force, it is easier for him to seize upon the reasonable means of promoting it. The case is different in his private life;

² For St. Thomas’ doctrine on the Precepts of the Natural Law cf. Ia IIae, q. 94, a. 2; q. 100, a. 1.

obligations do not seem so pressing; his world has changed, and perhaps the easier course is taken.

Then again, supposing we are in the domain of the natural acquired virtues, these are quite compatible with a state of mortal sin, and are notoriously unstable, precisely because they are *disconnected*; they have neither the binding force of divine charity nor of prudence; they lack the support of their neighbouring virtues. Thus a man who has, on many occasions, proved himself to be extremely brave, but who has, at the same time, a weakness for intoxicants, may one day, through intemperance, lose altogether his acquired virtue of fortitude, and neglect his essential duties as a fighting unit. He possesses his moral virtues in an imperfect state: they lack solidity.³

If such men are to be attracted towards the Catholic ideal it must be, above all, by contact with a Catholicism that is not merely believed in but *lived*: accustomed to look first of all for the tangible, they have a right to be given it. Deeds will tell rather than words, but the words may well follow. True, there is the unwritten law that religious topics should be banned from public gatherings in the Mess, but this will often make a man more ready to discuss in private; the writer remembers a conversation between two watch-keeping officers on the bridge of a cruiser one night in the Gulf of Aden, on the subject of the Immaculate Conception.

They are not insensible, too, to the visible Constitution of the Church; its hierarchic aspect is so much akin to what is of proved worth in their own life; its organization and discipline so apparent as to provoke the comment, "If any Church at all is right, it's yours." From this they may come to see something of the Divine Mission on earth, with authority to teach all men—even them. One seems to catch a distant echo of another disciplinarian, "For I also am a man subject to authority, having under me soldiers . . ."

It is the same with other aspects of the Code; all that is best in it is not merely enshrined but transformed and supernaturalized in the Catholic Church. The high sense of

³ Cf. Ia Iae, q. 65, a. 1.

BLACKFRIARS

honour is even better ensured when it is the outcome of grace obtained through the divinely appointed means of prayer and the Sacraments.

The Church too recognizes the *asceticism of efficiency*; that to do one's work whatever it may be as perfectly as possible, to have both mind and heart in it, to be always smart, reliable, painstaking and punctual, is often very real penance; it is a fasting, a taking of the discipline, above all a following of Him of whom it was said that "He did all things well."

Nor are there wanting examples of a combination of considerable professional ability with an evident Catholic life; to mention only the late Rear-Admiral Egerton, who, shortly before his promotion to Flag-Rank and his early death, was Flag Captain in the Mediterranean.

God grant that there may be many of those, covered by this very inadequate summary, to whom it will be given to hear the words: "I have not found so great faith, not even in Israel."

PETER WHITESTONE, O.P.