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COMFORT IN EVIL DAYS

WHEN the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima nearly two years ago the world seemed to hold its breath through dread. The hush of horror was succeeded by an almost desperate flurry to control the immense power for destruction which had been released. Mgr Knox has described the shock of the first news of the bomb, opening for many a vista of a world without God where man was left to his own terrible devices. In the autumn of that year he showed the theological implications of the event week by week in the columns of *The Tablet*.¹ The effect was one of deepening gloom. He offered 'An Alternative to Doubt' and 'An Alternative to Despair'. But these alternatives seemed only to emphasise the presence of despair and doubt pressing in upon the minds of sensitive Christians. Then came Lewis Mumford with a *Programme for Survival* (Secker & Warburg, 3s. 6d.) which hardly quelled the panic in our hearts, for he showed that we are increasing the tempo of our own destruction by geometric progression. Mumford's only hope was that man should achieve wisdom before using his knowledge, and this he could achieve only if he took religion—no matter what type of religion—more seriously. 'Eventually we may hope to create a world religion, but

¹ *God and the Atom*, by Mgr R. Knox (Sheed and Ward; 7s. 6d.). This work contains the substance of the *Tablet* articles, and is of more than passing value in adjusting men's ideas to the discovery of the release of atomic energy.

immediately we must rely upon the Hindu becoming a better Hindu, the Christian a better Christian, the Communist a better Communist'. Religion as the last ray of hope must be let in to try to stave off destruction. What a hope!

Already the British Council of Churches had had something of the same idea and had set up a Commission 'to consider the problems created by the discovery of atomic energy'. The Commission of course agreed that 'the Church' (a term seldom defined in such contexts) had a special mission in this crisis to offer a creative interpretation of the situation and to sustain men in the fulfilment of this interpretation. But it could in the nature of the case offer no specific lines of action, and it felt that a radical change in the Church was first required.² Most men will recognise the truth contained in these statements about the danger and the avoidance of the danger; the need for personal conversion and for a drawing together of all Christians was in those days last year very urgently realised.

Since that date we have tended to slip back into apathy. The B.B.C. has given us a series of talks on the discovery of the use of atomic energy. The series was conducted on an admirably objective plane, and attempted to put the whole question back into perspective. The evil use of atomic energy cannot be ignored, but there is no need to fall into a panic about its exclusively evil possibilities when there are other and peaceful uses to which it may eventually be put. We may justly feel dubious about even these so-called peaceful uses, but it is right that we should abandon the terror which would inevitably lead more quickly to destruction. But the hope of international control of evil uses of atomic energy, which in fact is the only hope offered by the speakers of the B.B.C. series, can hardly justify a relapse into apathy. For international control will inevitably depend on international agreement, and such an agreement between the main powers of the world seems as far removed as ever. Foreign Ministers and UNO councils in all their discussions and proposals seem to come to nothing and leave us still without the possession of peace.

In fact today there is as much cause for panic over the possible use of the atom bomb as there was in 1945. And added to the terrible uncertainty of that threat many others have since arisen. The growing suffering and discontent of the conquered nations, the increased power of revolutionary elements in Europe, the return to the old anti-Catholic prejudices among the other Christian bodies, and finally the weather itself wrecking a good deal of the food plans for England and the rest of Europe, a tragic example of the great increase in economic distress which can be produced by some vagaries in wind and frost

² Cf. *The Era of Atomic Power* (S.C.M. Press; 2s.).

and rain—all these things have come to increase our sense of insecurity and fear for the future. And an apathetic attitude to the present dangers will certainly bring us more quickly to destruction than the explosion of numerous atom bombs.

We need to shake ourselves free from apathy without jumping thence into panic. People are today too afraid to think. That is a very bad omen. We were almost too afraid to think in 1938 and 1939. But the evil consequences of thoughtlessness must be far greater now. We need to reaffirm the danger while at the same time restating the principles of hope expressed so well by Mgr Knox in his survey of the effects of the atomic bomb. The period immediately following Easter and Pentecost is the time best suited to reviewing the dangers, for at this time we may be strengthened by the power of Christian hope in its most striking manifestation.

The Christian ought to be able to hold his head up in face of every danger, even the most cataclysmic or the most dismal. And when he succumbs to the general fear and perturbation he is viewing present evils with non-Christian eyes. He is tempted to count only on human reasoning and on the combined powers of mere men to direct the course of human events. And so for most people today who go to Mass on Sunday and fulfil their religious duties normally it is difficult not to count the pros and cons of future survival by the same methods as those who know not God. They open their papers in the morning and read the gloomy news, but they seldom bring their Christian faith to bear when assessing the nature or depth of the gloom. They are therefore miserable in a miserable world.

But St Paul says that if Christ be not risen we are the most miserable of men. It is, in fact, far worse for us if we do not bring our faith to bear on the miseries of the day. We are behaving as though Christ had not risen and thus accepting the same miserable standards of the pagan and adding to these the miseries of a faded hope in something infinitely higher and nobler. Having renounced pagan standards we cannot relapse into being good pagans; we are inevitably *bad* pagans. The disciples en route for Emmaus were utterly despondent; there was surely little for them to live for after the promises of Christ had faded.

As Christians, then, we must reaffirm the foundation of our belief in order to face the evils of the day with equanimity and even joy. The fact that Christ is risen and has appeared to Simon and to all Simon Peter's successors leaves us no excuse for despondency. However evil the day the faith remains the same; to indulge in gloom is to close one's eyes to that faith, adopting pagan standards and giving us an occasion of greater misery than the pagan. The news of the resur-

rection spread at once among the apostles and disciples, and until the ascension we can follow the intense excitement and joy which existed in their company. And even after the ascension when they had stared up into the sky and when one would have thought that once more disappointment and gloom would descend upon them, they returned to Jerusalem rejoicing greatly. They did not again relapse into misery because they knew then that Christ had triumphed over evil, had triumphed over all the pettifogging vices of Pilate and the pharisees—cowardice, jealousy, suspicion—had triumphed over death itself. He triumphed not simply as God: his human flesh had risen again resplendent in its human life—death could no more have dominion over him. . . . And then came the Spirit to confirm them in the same victory, for in Christ human nature had triumphed over all these evils, not by its own unaided powers of reason, will and prudence, it was the triumph of supernaturalised human nature.

After the Spirit had come upon them there was no holding the apostles; they were everywhere setting Europe alight with this great news. They did not go to tell men that one claiming to be both God and man had suggested that they should do good to their neighbours, be just and equable and long-suffering. All that could be learned from Aristotle or Plato. They came to tell men that Christ had risen; the wise in their own conceits, the philosophical brood at Athens laughed at this and thought that the Resurrection must be some kind of goddess. But eventually Europe heard the great news and men were soon being butchered, massacred in circumstances as foul as Belsen if not with as widespread devastation as that produced by the atom bomb. The persecutions while they lasted could have been as terrifying to those early Christians as the present state of the world is to us. And for the Christian fundamentally there has been no change in the situation. The evil is still evil; the atom bomb may be more powerful but it is not intrinsically more evil than other instruments of destruction. The distress of nations, the starvation, the inability of the powers to agree—each age thinks it has the worst of enemies to deal with. Each age looks to the fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecies in its own time. The early Christian had received the Apocalypse hot from the pen of the long-lived apostle. And we are right ourselves to expect these fulfilments today. The four horsemen are riding at us now. To whom can we turn? Always we must go back to the same person, the same fundamental reality, to the risen Christ. His ascension has made no difference, or rather it has made this difference, that it is now possible for him to remain at the side of every individual Christian, strengthening and comforting him. The triumphant humanity of our Lord is with us all the time. Our own faithlessness

is the only thing that drives him as it were back to heaven.

The risen Christ is with his Church to the consummation of the world and we cannot look for a radical change in her. She has all the powers, and the source of all joy in her midst. It is for us Christians to recognise him and not to walk morosely and despondently in our day like the two disciples setting out from Jerusalem to go to Emmaus. We have no excuse for not recognising him for we know that he is risen. So we have no excuse for fear or despondency, for we should be able to go with joy into the arena to be hacked to pieces, with joy to the dungeons to be starved to death, with joy to all the devastations devised by man. After our Lord had described the ghastly terrors of the approaching last day he said we were to lift up our heads to see our approaching redemption, to catch the first glimpse of the Son of God in glory.

Admittedly the above perhaps over-simplified statement of the joy of the Christian faith offers no practical solution to the modern problems such as the British Council of Churches had at first hoped to find. It certainly does not offer any escape from the threatening evils. But though it offers no escape and no solution it does supply the necessary foundation of courage and cheerful acceptance of the whole situation which are absolutely necessary before any true Christian can begin even to try to help to avoid the dangers. Moreover this acceptance in the spirit of faith brings the supernatural powers of Christ to bear upon these evils, the power over death. In the Christian thus enlivened by faith Christ lives and works, in him Christ triumphs not in a worldly-wise kind of success, but in a triumph which cannot be measured by time or be limited by human stupidity or malice.

So the true peace-lover who wishes to overcome the powers of evil may not shut his eyes to the evils man has done nor to the chaos of the time. He must be fully aware of the evils, fully cognisant of all the threats, all the possibilities of such dangerous discoveries as the release of atomic energy; but he may not give way to panic or depression at what he sees. He must walk through the pile of decaying humanity without holding his nose. But he must walk in faith, in the presence of the risen Christ, in the courage of his triumph. And he must walk with joy. Will he ever stumble out on the other side of the stinking pile? Who can tell? 'It is not for you to know the times nor the hours'.

THE EDITOR