

# Fascism and British Catholic Writers 1924–1939: Part 1

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The relationship between Fascism and the  
literary intelligentsia badly needs investigating.

*George Orwell*

Power is of its nature evil, whoever wields it.

*Jacob Burckhardt*

Christ's Kingdom was a counter kingdom.

*John Henry Newman*

It has often been remarked that in the 1920s and 1930s some British Catholics sympathized with Fascism; but the collocation of 'Catholic' and 'Fascism' is alarming, the more so when it is realized that the Catholics in question were the writers, the intellectuals: civilized, educated, sophisticated and otherwise likable and mostly well-intentioned people, who expressed varying measures of attraction to what we now know to be the politics of megalomania, elitism, frustration, prejudice, deceit and brutality. How could cultured Catholics be even partially attracted to Fascism: what did they see to admire in it, and what were the conditions which permitted and provoked them to find good in it?

The present subject of 'Catholic pro-Fascism' is a minefield, with some of the mines laid by rightist Catholics, who, believing it to be damaging to the Catholic Church, do not wish the subject to be discussed by other than apologeticists. One such mine is to say that the word 'Fascist' cannot be used, either because it is a mere term of abuse, or because its meaning is so variable as to be worthless, or because it is generally confused with Nazism; so to speak the words 'Catholic' and 'Fascist' in the same breath is to risk unjustifiably tainting the memory of good people. But the memory of such people can be clarified only by considering exactly what they were saying, and why. 'Fascism' is indeed a difficult word, there being overlap between Fascism and Nazism; and 'Fascist' being then, as now, a term of abuse, which those who sympathized with Fascism eschewed, and whose meaning was disputed even in the 1930s. It could indeed be dropped, in favour of

speaking in terms of extreme right-wing, authoritarian statism; but it has a general currency and convenience value. When one speaks of the 'pro-Fascist sympathies' of these writers, it is not to connote opprobrium, but both to indicate that they were not members of a Fascist party, and to implicitly acknowledge that all of them (with two possible exceptions), or their apologists, denied that they were Fascists; while denoting someone who had a measure of sympathy with the motivations, aims or actions of Mussolini, Franco, Salazar or other Fascists. Most of the writers considered here had caveats and outright criticisms of Fascism—notably G.K. Chesterton and Christopher Dawson; but their 'anti-Fascism' has been considered elsewhere, and the subject of the present essay is their positive responses to Fascism. Suffice it to say that understanding why Catholics wrote favourably of Fascism is partly a matter of mapping the lines of influence: just as Fascism itself was a reaction to certain fears, so writers were influenced by what they feared; and the writings of other Catholics created an ambience of respectability, a bandwagon; while the institutional Catholic Church helped to determine opinion by what it did and did not say and do. But this ultimately leaves intact the mystery of how they could be attracted—when many others were repelled—to what should be inherently, instinctively objectionable to Christianity, namely Fascism as a cult of power.

Hilaire Belloc, who is generally recognized as the chief Catholic writer to be kind to Fascism, provides the earliest record of Catholic pro-Fascism, and is widely assumed to have been the major literary influence on British Catholic controversialists in this period. The case for Belloc as the dominant literary influence on his fellow Catholic writers is as strong as any, for his was the loudest, most insistent speculative, propagandist, controversialist and apologeticist Catholic voice of the time in England; and his thought processes were demonstrably picked up by such as G.K. Chesterton, Douglas Jerrold and Douglas Woodruff: all well positioned to pass on his influence to a host of lesser lights. He was alienated from British democracy, believing it was not just corrupt in practice, but irremediably diseased in its essence; for the 'Liberalism' which informed it was in his view really a nineteenth-century secular, anti-Christian creature of financial power. Believing that social justice necessitated the devolution of power and wealth, his frustration with the shackles of established society led him to tolerate violence and dictatorship as the means of overthrowing existing power structures. He said that the French Revolution was 'a reversion to the normal—a sudden and violent return to those conditions which are the necessary bases of health in any political community'; which bases

were 'the Roman idea': 'absolute sovereignty in the case of the State, absolute ownership in the case of the individual'.<sup>1</sup> His friend and biographer Robert Speaight observed that 'he was never afraid of despotism, because the power of a despot was a public—and generally, in its origin, a popular—power. He never doubted that despotism could be an expression of democracy.'<sup>2</sup> Keenly aware that the Church did not bind him to prefer any particular form of government, his ambivalence represents the ambivalence of the Catholic attitude to Fascism: he loathed state-idolatry, but approved of dictatorship; he was a democrat who tolerated despotism. He valued the heroic figure, who would cut through the Gordian knot of society's ills, so bound up with the conspiratorial secrecy of the powerful. Speaight adds that Belloc held the 'very un-English' concept that 'power was something to be seized', and links him with Charles Maurras, with whom, according to Speaight, he agreed more closely than any other political theorist of his time. There is a parallelism between Belloc and Maurras, in that both opposed Protestantism and Jewry for socio-political reasons, and in that Maurras was an atheist who used Christianity for political ends, while Belloc was a self-declared 'sceptic' ('my whole nature is sceptical'), who spoke of Catholicism almost wholly in terms of the institutional Church as a social, moral and cultural—and hence political—foundation. Pius X had blessed the work of Maurras, whose royalist, ultra-conservative movement *Action Française*—an ideological fellow-traveller with Fascism—had the devoted following of many Frenchmen and several of the French episcopate, some of whom turned a blind eye when, in 1926/7, Pius XI suppressed it (not because it was neo-Fascist, but because he saw it as using Catholicism for political ends). Apparently, at that time in Catholic circles there was little to deprecate in a close association with Maurras: in 1939 the leading Catholic journal *The Tablet* breathed a sigh of relief that *Action Française* had been reconciled with the Holy See, claiming Maurras's 'is a traditional Corporatism, similar to that indicated in the Encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI . . . It bears many resemblances to the Distributivism [sic] of Mr. Belloc and the late G.K.Chesterton.'<sup>3</sup> The word 'Corporatism' points us in the direction of Fascism, whose social policy Corporatism was.

In *The Cruise of the Nona* (1925) Belloc relates how in early 1924 he 'made a sort of pilgrimage to see Mussolini', and how, so far from being disillusioned, he found him to be the man of destiny for whose coming he had so long yearned. During a long interview he discovers he sees eye to eye with him, and perceives him to be well-read, with 'good judgment on the whole', including a full understanding that British

parliamentary politics was a game, a façade, designed to conceal the power of 'International Financiers'; a man of the middle, intent on maintaining the balance of power, and, though not religious himself, committed to confirming the 'religious peace', while heading a regime which was conducive to the revival of faith in the young. 'It is,' he asserts, 'the mark of the capable man that ambition disgusts him. That mark is most notable in Mussolini.' He commends the Fascist State's intelligence and virility, dubbing it an 'excellent experiment'. In effect, then, Belloc was commending Mussolini's Fascism to his fellow Catholics. The then acclaimed order of Mussolini's Italy will certainly have appealed to Belloc, since he yearned for order in society: he was to think that the main validation for the war against Hitler was that Nazi Germany was a force of disorder. Not only had Mussolini given order to Italy, but a Roman style of order, and for Belloc ancient Rome, transmitted to the modern world through Roman Catholicism, was a touchstone and model of civilization, so that Italian Fascism held for him a deep cultural and mythical appeal. Henceforward he spoke up for Fascist Italy as an increasingly powerful Catholic country, condemning sanctions taken against it for imperialistic behaviour (even though he was anti-imperialist). In 1939, having visited Italy again, he observed that the Italians supported Mussolini 'because he is against the money power'—Belloc was anti-capitalist: and, on the very eve of war, declared him to be 'a very sane and well-balanced man'.<sup>4</sup> 'Later,' comments Speaight, 'Belloc came to weary of Fascism's monotonous self-praise, though he never faced up to the dilemma of despotism; the dilemma of power grown incompetent or corrupt which cannot be constitutionally removed.'<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in the Spanish Civil War Belloc supported Franco, because, he said, he had 'patriotism, the traditions of an independent peasantry and, more important than either, religion' on his side, and was fighting disorder.<sup>6</sup> He thought the welfare of European civilization was in Franco's hands, and enthusiastically visited the Spanish battlefields towards the end of the war, eventually meeting Franco, whom he described—in a way redolent of the extravagance of Fascist propaganda—as 'the man who has saved us all'.<sup>7</sup>

G.K.Chesterton, another reference point for the English Catholic literati, appears to have followed Belloc in this matter, though with slightly less enthusiasm. As dominant figures, they were very likely influences on the way the Catholic intelligentsia viewed Fascism, giving the impression that Fascism had good aspects, with some that were preferable to elements of British democracy, which were potentially adoptable. As with Belloc, his fundamentally beneficent principles—a passion for justice, democracy and liberty, and compassion for the

poor—combined with his detestation of what he saw as a thoroughly corrupt British political system, dominated by an all-powerful, cynical and selfish plutocracy, to open his mind to the possibility of the Fascist solution, which appeared to him to be of the people and anti-capital. The Catholic writer and publisher Maisie Ward, who had written a novel, *In the Shadow of Mussolini* (1927), not entirely unfavourable to Mussolini, tells in her 1944 biography of her friend and mentor Chesterton how he visited Rome in 1929 and met the dictator. She says he desired to be fair to Fascism, and that his case for it issued from liberal democracy having fallen to the tyranny of wealth (with the effect that the Liberal State had forfeited the right to attack it); that for him Mussolini embodied a belief in what he called ‘the civic necessity of Virtue’, in open government, and in (her words) ‘human dignity, in respect for women as mothers, in piety and the honour due to the dead’; that he saw Fascism as the response to (in her phrase) ‘the evils of an evil government’. These are understanding words, especially in view of their being written during a war against a Fascist Italy built on the ruination of democracy partly by means of thuggery. She suggests that he was taken in by the atmosphere of hope—to which she herself witnesses—amongst the Italian people. Finally, she quotes Chesterton saying, ‘Fascism has brought back order into the State; but this will not be lasting unless it has brought back order into the mind.’<sup>8</sup> It is a suitably ambivalent note on which to end an ambivalent account of an ambivalent attitude.

Chesterton’s own account of Fascist Italy is contained in *The Resurrection of Rome* (1930), where he commends the naturalness of Fascism, remarking rather fancifully on the Italian ‘passion of order’, which is, he asserts, ‘a popular appetite and a popular pleasure’, marking ‘the return of the Romans’.<sup>9</sup> Fascism, he declares, is free of the power of capital; and he praises Mussolini for being faithful to his principles—in contrast to democratic governments, which are faithless to their principle of freedom—and for rendering public affairs open, while squashing secretive groups.<sup>10</sup> In an essay of 1934 he says Fascism has been ‘in some ways a healthy reaction against the irresponsible treason of corrupt politics’.<sup>11</sup> On balance, he seems to say more in favour of Fascism than against it. As late as 1935 he refuses to denounce Italy for its imperialistic adventuring—though, with Belloc, he was anti-imperialist—because that would single it out from the more conventional imperialistic adventurers, and declares, ‘I will not insult an honest Fascist who does believe in the State, to please a dishonest demagogue who does not believe in the Democracy.’ He still respects Mussolini, thinking him honest in comparison with Liberal parliamentarians, and does not mind that he suppresses newspapers; and

he thinks Fascism is a reaction against 'scepticism' (for which read the Liberal mind-set) in the direction of hope and positive action.<sup>12</sup> His feelings for Mussolini are surely one with his appreciation of the just monarch, and similar to his feeling for Robespierre as the one prepared to take a scythe to society's corruptions; just as his toleration of the Fascist revolution echoes his toleration of the French Revolution, with its attendant violence, as a necessary evil in the cause of liberation. Perhaps he extended a tolerant spirit towards Fascism partly because of his observation that 'many' English Fascists were Distributists (whose leader he was), and 'some' were Catholics.<sup>13</sup> Having at least temporarily tolerated the Fascist form of statism, he at last assured his readers that he had 'early begun to doubt, and later to deny, the Socialist or any other assumption that involved a complete confidence in the State,' and declared, 'I am no Fascist';<sup>14</sup> though the disclaimer was rather suggestive that some had thought he was.

Though he died before the Spanish Civil War broke out, Chesterton provided an epilogue to the above in some comments he made on the situation in Spain. In an essay of 1935 he speaks of 'the profound and popular Catholic change' in political ideals which had arisen (apparently during the time of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship and Premiership), and of the opposition to 'certain inhuman ideals, by which men would lose humanity in losing personal liberty and property', of the Republic (which succeeded in 1931). Then he refers to the election of November 1933, in which 'the Catholic ideals won', because 'a vast majority voted . . . for the traditional truths, which had been normal to the Nation for much more than a thousand years'. It was a vote 'against Communism, against Atheism'. But then 'the Socialists' 'used bombs and guns and instruments of violence to prevent the fulfilment of the will of the people.'<sup>15</sup> This account reveals Chesterton as an embryonic Francoist, seeing the conflict in terms of Communist black and Catholic white, in accordance with the version propagated by Spanish rightists. Here Chesterton identifies himself—presumably unwittingly—with the party of ruthless power and privilege, believing that they somehow stand for all the good things he himself values. His version of events is entirely mistaken, when measured against the account of a modern authority.<sup>16</sup>

Since Belloc and Chesterton and their associates were Catholics and commonly wrote in a Catholic sense, it is pertinent to ask what bearing the Catholic Church's policy and pronouncements might have had upon pro-Fascist sympathies. The Church was normally anti-libertarian, and consistently condemned Socialism and Communism, Pius XI himself being known to be rigidly anti-Communist. So there was an immediate sympathy between Catholicism and Fascism, which was itself inherently

anti-libertarian and antagonistic to Communism. It follows that Catholics, alienated by the corruption of democracy, were more likely to opt for the Fascist rather than the Communist alternative; and it was a possible alternative because the Church declared that it had no interest in party politics and had no definitive preference on the political nature of society. Despite this declaration, it was, however, perfectly clear that while the Church theoretically deprecated any force of the Left, it in practice aligned with the forces of the Right; and though Fascism had radical aspects, it was itself in effect a rightist movement. It would indeed be difficult to argue that the Church was a Leftist movement, and there was a certain natural affinity between an authoritarian Church and authoritarian Fascism. An authoritarian Church, which under Pius IX had elevated the notion of the Church's 'Temporal Power' to unimpeachable doctrine, and which had traditionally taught the duty of the citizen to be loyal and obedient to civil authority, appeared to inculcate a culture of passivity before power, which coincided with the Fascist demand upon the citizenry. Adrian Hastings has commented: 'The authoritarian character of the Church inclined [1930s English Catholics] to approve of authoritarianism in the State too, and they looked upon Mussolini, Franco and Salazar at least a great deal more benevolently than did most other Englishmen.'<sup>17</sup> In his judgment, 'theological Ultramontanism was for a while fairly easily harnessed to a cultural and social Ultramontanism which at first hailed Mussolini, and continued to hail Franco and Salazar, as the finest expressions of the Catholic political point of view'; and, similarly, in the opinion of Franco's biographer, 'there were sufficiently large areas of coincidence between Franco and the Church—hostility to rationalism, freemasonry, liberalism, socialism and Communism—to ensure that the Church willingly accepted much of the political rhetoric of the Nationalist zone.'<sup>18</sup> And another authority, commenting on Italian Fascism, observed: 'Catholics showed a greater tolerance of Fascism because of the concessions which the State had made to the Church, because of a mutual interest in country, family and property, and as a defence against such common enemies as communism, 'liberalism' and Freemasonry.'<sup>19</sup> Consequently, individuals and their Church were desensitized and mute or myopic when confronted with Fascist evil, ecclesiastical dumbness exacerbating the blindness of writers.

Also, however, writers were caught by the avalanche of rightist propaganda whose force was underpinned by the ambiguities of the situation; and they may well have been ignorant of certain unpalatable actions of Fascists. When, for example, Belloc wrote so glowingly of Mussolini, was he aware that following the 1924 election the Fascists



attacked scores of Catholic institutions; or did he know, and regard this as merely an unfortunate means to the greater end of battling Anarchism, Communism and Liberalism? The fact that Fascist societies were Catholic ones, wherein very many Catholics, clergy and laity, supported Fascism, doubtless impressed many British Catholics; and Salazar and Franco were widely perceived as good Catholics, who were genuinely fighting for God's cause: in Franco's State the Church ruled alongside the landowners, the *grandees* and the army; and Salazar's Portugal was Catholic, as well as authoritarian and corporate in nature. In 1929 Pius XI, who declared Mussolini to be 'a man sent by Providence', signed the Lateran Treaty with the dictator, thereby granting legitimacy to the Fascist regime, the Italian clergy consequently encouraging their congregations to vote Fascist at the next election: a virtually unnecessary effort, since the Vatican secured the dissolution of the anti-Fascist Catholic democratic party, the *Partito Popolare*. The seeds of ambiguity were sown, and then watered, when the Pope failed to condemn Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. Nor did Vatican statements particularly help to precipitate anti-Fascist feeling amongst Catholics. The papal encyclical *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, of 1931, is sometimes promoted as—and, indeed, was—an anti-Fascist declaration; but it was sufficiently ambivalent for a Jesuit article (of 1936) to represent it as protesting, in a friendly manner, against certain aspects of Fascism while not condemning it in itself.<sup>20</sup> The encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) was also no prophylactic against Fascism: in fact, one can see how it could appeal to both Chestertonian Distributists and Fascists, for it included a critique of capitalism, while emphasizing the incompatibility of Catholicism with Socialism, and favouring the building up of 'corporations' (like guilds or unions) to help unify society: Mussolini had established just such trades 'corporations', and the 'corporate state', with its professed intention—which appealed to the Church—of eliminating class conflict, became a fundamental aspect of Italian Fascism. Though the encyclical questioned the totalitarian State, the Pope was no democrat, admired strong leadership, hated Communism, and appreciated Fascism's emphasis on the family and social discipline. The net result of all this was that if English Catholics had a leaning towards Fascism, the Church was not the institution to interdict it. Towards the end of the 1930s it could still appear to such a knowledgeable Catholic as Douglas Woodruff that the Church 'plainly ... [has] sympathy and goodwill . . . for Fascism'.<sup>21</sup>

We are now in a position to look more closely at the political mindset of British Catholic writers in this period. Just as the a-historical temptation to condemn pro-Fascist Catholics on the ground that they



'should have known better' (in the sense of knowing everything that we know about Fascism), and consistently opposed it, should be avoided, so must the determinist trap of supposing that they were predestined to speak of it approvingly. In the first place, French Catholics were not so readily impressed by Fascism; and in Italy Luigi Sturzo, the priest-leader of *Partito Popolare*, and his many Catholic co-workers, opposed Fascism, as did many Spanish Catholics. In Germany enlightened Catholics such as Karl Adam and Joseph Pieper spoke in friendly tones about Nazism; but their society was saturated with Nazi ideology and encased in fear of the extreme right wing, in a way that British Catholics did not experience. Nor was English Catholicism as a whole especially prone to Fascism: as one authority observes, 'the appeal of the corporate state and of fascism, felt so strongly among sections of the Irish Church in the 1930s, was not greatly echoed among English Catholics—and certainly not among Catholic working-class people. . . . English Catholicism was too English in its social and political outlook.'<sup>22</sup> According to Douglas Woodruff, the conservative editor of *The Tablet*, in 1939 Communist-inspired anti-Fascist propaganda had 'gone very far. Most of the Catholics in this country are supporters of the Labour Party, in which even those trade union leaders who are a chief obstacle to Communism here, have been led to adopt the whole of the Communist ideology on Spain.'<sup>23</sup> Even intellectuals, however, did not have to be unduly understanding of Fascism, as the case of Eric Gill illustrates: as opposed to big business and the Liberal parliamentary Establishment as either Belloc or Chesterton, he nevertheless perceived that Fascism was 'the sort of state ownership favoured by the big industrialists' so hated by those two. Gill joined other Catholics in a letter to Archbishop Hinsley and the Hierarchy, urging them to protest against the bombing of open towns by the Francoists; but they received short shrift. 'See,' he declared, 'how us catholics are doped! . . . I know in whom I believe, and its not old man Franco.'<sup>24</sup> (Graham Greene steered clear of the controversy, but he sympathised with the Republicans, especially the Basque Catholics, whom Franco's ally Hitler was specially delegated to attack: he, at least, was one Catholic writer who was appalled by Fascist behaviour.)<sup>25</sup> The Catholic intelligentsia's drift towards Fascism was the more striking because there was no substantial trend within it towards Communism, as there was in the wider literary community, where Fascist sympathies were, by contrast, rare.

Those Catholics who were attracted to the extreme Right were in good company, for many parts of the British Establishment had the same tendency, of which the British Union of Fascists was only the sharp focus; so they were not wildly eccentric. Many were disillusioned

with, and even alienated from, the Liberal consensus and parliamentary democracy. Symbolically, Mgr. Ronald Knox observed in 1940 that 'the Catholic Church, in particular, has had much to suffer from the democracies.'<sup>26</sup> Such Catholic suspiciousness was underpinned by a Church which had opposed contemporary society since at least the anti-Christian Enlightenment, which was conceived to be the origin of modern society's ideals. Given the general environment of profound ideological disturbance and social change, it was almost natural, then, for Catholics to look to a radical alternative politics to incarnate a more Christian society. In 1935 Luigi Sturzo, the Christian Democrat exiled in England by Mussolini, discussed the point: 'there is,' he observed, 'scarcely anyone who does not speak of the crisis of democracy;' and there were 'those who, believing democracy to be on its death-bed, would like to give it the happy dispatch.' The state of mind which said 'it may be necessary to use force, . . . [or] have recourse to dictatorship' to stop the Socialists and Communists 'is creeping almost imperceptibly into England,' where faith in 'the free British tradition' is 'somewhat shaken'. 'To-day,' he adds, 'people talk of a corporative system as an infallible remedy. But there can be two corporative systems: one for dictatorships ... and another for democracies'<sup>27</sup> It was the confusion between these two systems that partly stimulated Catholic interest in Fascism,<sup>28</sup> a confusion exemplified in Chesterton's Distributist movement. Chesterton himself was critical of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (which was active from 1932), though his colleague William Titterton thought that British Fascists used Distributist economics, and some Distributists—many of whom were Catholics—were Fascist fellow-travellers, even though the brutality of British Fascism was evident by 1934. Unlike the British Left, most Catholic intellectuals did not accept the Marxist analysis, which equated Fascism with statism and Capitalism, so that there was room in their minds for the—as it emerged—false notion that Fascism was anti-capital, and thus untainted by the corrupt political deadwood of the past.

If *laissez-faire* individualistic Capitalism was a fallen idol, so too was the entire Liberal agenda. In 1937 the Catholic journalist Michael de La Bedoyère observed that the Vatican was suspicious of the League of Nations because it was 'the happy hunting-ground of a humanistic liberalism . . . [or] of an atheistic materialism.' 'The Vatican,' he added, 'evidently detests Communism and the liberalism which she fears leads up to it.' The view was indeed abroad that the papacy had foretold the demise of Liberalism, and welcomed the prospect.<sup>29</sup> Such hostility could only render Fascism more attractive. In 1937 the Catholic writer Bernard Wall judged that democratic and liberal powers and individuals

were allying themselves with revolutionaries, on a platform of shared 'bourgeois materialism' and hatred of traditionalism, while 'Fascism' stood firmly for tradition in an ideologically fractured Europe. The Fascist powers, he comments, 'are now as powerful on the Continent as the liberal and socialist powers which comprise the League of Nations;' and 'it is liberal countries like France and England which seem backward' in comparison to them. 'Fascism represents a return to historical realism, a reaction against the deracinate cosmopolitanism which preceded it;' and its discipline 'may be a necessary means for giving mankind today a corporate social conscience—an inevitable reaction against political individualism and economic *laissez-faire*.' Authoritarian regimes, Wall suggests, might be as productive of social justice as democratic ones; and he looks forward to the Francoist revolt happening repeatedly.<sup>30</sup> (In 1938 De la Bedoyère commended Wall's book *Spain of the Spaniards*, remarking Wall's love of the ideals of Nationalist Spain.)<sup>31</sup>

Even Catholics one thinks of as 'liberal intellectuals' were entangled to one degree or another by contemporary attitudes. Reading Christopher Dawson's *Religion and the Modern State* (1935), it is surprisingly possible to see how Douglas Jerrold could mistake him for a pro-Fascist fellow-traveller, because Dawson was dispassionate enough to see—in the light of general perceptions—what was plausibly beneficial about Fascism; which qualities made him think it had a bright future. Though Dawson was certainly influenced by Belloc and Chesterton, he was an original thinker, and a clearer, more analytical one than they, so that his book provides an important and lucid marker of how Catholics could have leaned towards Fascism. He observes that its appeal lies in its patriotism, its hostility to an apparently failed liberal democracy, its critique of both individualistic Capitalism and revolutionary Socialism, its optimism and energy, its heroic aspect and its promise of a cooperative society based on a planned economy marked by social and individual responsibility. He thought that Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* commended the 'Corporate State', that 'the Catholic social ideals set forth in the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI have far more affinity with those of Fascism than with those of either Liberalism or Socialism;' and even that 'Catholicism is by no means hostile to the authoritarian ideal of the State', the Catholic notion of the ruler and its hierarchical vision bearing more resemblance to the Fascist concept of the 'leader' than to authority within 'parliamentary democracy and party government'. He believed that Communism, not Fascism, was Catholicism's mortal enemy, that Fascism and Nazism were only potentially anti-Catholic (although he

was sure that Nazism and Catholicism would come to blows), and that Italian Fascism actually favoured Catholicism.<sup>32</sup> His emphasis on God's kingdom being not of this world could have been construed as inculcating political passivity or non-interventionism, thereby buttressing the impression that one need not as a Christian oppose Fascism, and leading his readers, reared on an ambience of toleration of Fascism, to overlook the fact that he also plainly saw the evils tainting the movement. Even in Dawson, then, the prophetic voice of heroic protest against evil was muted.

Michael de La Bedoyère pressed the point of what constituted the Christian society in his *Christian Crisis* (1940), in which he goes further than Dawson (from whom he learned), admitting that it is not just secular society that has been found wanting, but the Christian body—in particular Catholicism—which has ‘failed to be the salvation of the past’, so that now we must ask, ‘what sort of Christianity, and how precisely will Christianity accomplish the task that awaits it?’ What should a Catholic society be like: surely not Fascist—one would have thought—for Fascism is—in his phrases—one of the ‘new false gods’, the ‘anti-Christian philosophies’ which Catholicism has failed to oppose? He then valuably offers a hypothesis of the mental strategies by which Catholic toleration for extreme right-wing politics came into being. Over the previous half-century, he suggests, Catholics came to be increasingly seduced by secular values, particularly of a nationalistic and conservative sort, so that the majority were attracted to ‘Nationalism and Capitalism disguised in the dress of Christian fidelity to authority, order, respect for one’s betters, etc.’, their Christian spirit effectually privatized. So though, with Dawson, he groups Liberalism, Socialism and Nationalism in the same bag of evils, namely anti-Christian progressivism—which he calls ‘Dawnism’—he observes that Catholics were less sensitive to the dangers concealed within Nationalism, and were even encouraged by ‘Christian leaders, not least the clergy’, ever fearful of Communism, ‘until very recent times indeed’, to participate in such Nationalism ‘under the guise of Christian patriotism and Christian loyalty to the established civil authority’; this predisposition exaggerated by Italian Fascism being considered ‘a blessing by the Church’ because ‘it was exceedingly friendly’ towards it. And so the Church made a bargain with ‘a force which was nakedly anti-Christian’, which used Catholicism for nationalistic ends.<sup>33</sup>

It is significant that though he perceives the polluted ground whence springs pro-Fascism, he, like Dawson, does not proceed to explicitly and sustainedly attack Fascism, thereby confounding the expectations he has raised. Rather, he thinks that Salazar's Fascism—so generally approved

by Catholics—is emancipated from Dawnism in its Republican guise, achieving a ‘true marriage between Christian spiritual principles and all that is good in modern progress and ideas’, while helping to avert the ‘Bolshevism of Spain’, where the ‘timely resistance of the army’ saved the Spanish people from ‘extremist Socialistic, Communistic and Anarchistic doctrines’, and where Franco ‘put the restoration of Catholicity in the forefront of his programme’. Correlatively, he demonizes secular progressivism as Dawnism, alternately known as ‘Liberalism’. The drift of his argument—and perhaps in this he represents others—appears to suggest that at least Salazar and Franco stand for Catholicism, so they are preferable to any secular political order, no matter how reformist. The road to hell, he seems to be saying, is paved with good intentions, which—then involving the League of Nations, democracy and the welfare state—were playing into the hands of the Dawnists; so that Catholics rightly took a more pragmatic line of supping with the devil: in effect, tolerating, even accommodating, Fascism, and certainly not criticizing it, which would have been counter-productive. With Dawson, he laments the secularization of ‘culture’, yet insists that Christianity should keep out of politics. He says the Church is at war with Dawnism, but then excuses it for failing to attack what could be interpreted as a debased manifestation of it, suggesting it is quite understandable, given the peril of Dawnism, that the Church found herself ‘leaning rather heavily towards the new Totalitarian Nationalism’; understandable that ‘her natural bias towards a strong Nationalism and a secure civil authority made her look indulgently at the excesses of the Totalitarianism which might save Europe from anarchy and Bolshevism.’ ‘The realism of Fascism,’ he says (picking up Wall’s word), ‘in exploding “Dawnism”, in taking over what was genuine in Socialism and in strengthening civil authority, instinctively appealed to the Catholic mind.’ Of this ‘anti-Dawnist’ stance he judges: ‘this view prevailed among the clergy and Catholic writers in the British Isles.’<sup>34</sup> The dialectical alchemy of his account is the more astonishing in view of the date at which it was written.

It remains to put some flesh onto these bones by describing how and in what context other British Catholic writers expressed a measure of sympathetic understanding of Fascism.

1 Belloc *Danton A Study* (James Nisbet, 1899) pp.1, 14.

2 Speaight *Hilaire Belloc* (Hollis & Carter, 1957) p.128; cf. ib. pp.52, 131.

3 *The Tablet* 22 July 1939, pp.100-103.

4 A.N.Wilson *Hilaire Belloc* (Penguin, 1986) pp.359, 361, 364.

5 Speaight *Hilaire Belloc* pp.434-5.

6 *Tablet* 15 July 1939, pp.71, 72.

- 7 Speaight *Hilaire Belloc* p.464.
- 8 Ward *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* 2nd. ed. (Sheed & Ward, 1944) pp.491-3.
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**To be continued.**