

# BLACKFRIARS

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## RELIGION IN POLITICS

FATHER GERALD VANN'S broadcast talks here reproduced strike a topical note in view of the Albert Hall meeting of the Industrial Christian Fellowship at the end of September and of the discussion it aroused. Religion has an intimate relation to politics and prayer is the heart of religion. A man's social and political action should, in fact, flow from his relations with God in prayer. But the primary question brought to the fore by the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech is whether one's prayer and religion are to play an essential part in particular practical judgments about society and politics.

The attack on the Archbishop, in the letters to the *Times* for instance, did not lack an element of truth. There were times when he left the principles he rightly declared to be the province of religion for applications which were far from being the only ones acceptable to the conscience of the Christian. But the fundamental problem raised was that of the very mission of the Church. Is the Church to turn from preaching eternal salvation through the Cross to concentrate all her energies on providing for the social well-being and happiness of the citizen on earth? In constantly driving home the social teaching implied in the Sermon on the Mount, as well as in the relation between man and his Creator, we are in danger of presenting that teaching upside-down. We may find ourselves standing on a platform shoulder to shoulder with Socialist and Communist, trying to raise our voices above theirs and to sell our wares by making them more attractive than those of our 'rivals.' If the ultimate appeal is to some future Garden of Eden on this earth, as it is with most 'isms' to-day, it is not religion. We should remember this when we insist on the Social Encyclicals and the Joint Pastoral, for the appeal to self-interest is the central feature of publicity. Popular religion tends towards superstition and false mysticism because of this mundane motive, the use of religious values for a selfish happiness on earth. The present call of mysticism goes with a theory of 'non-attachment' which cuts one off from the troubles of the world but introduces no love of mortification, either active or passive. Prayer can never be taken up purely for the sake of politics. True religion leads through all these things, perfecting nature as it goes, and brings man to God.

The Archbishop, then, gave a more convincing reply to his critics in the *Times* than his supporters when he pointed out the distortion of his speech by the newspapers. They had in fact only reported those parts of his speech which seemed to impinge on politics or economics because they naturally had greater 'news value.' The final appeal to recognize man's responsibility before God and to relate all to the worship of God—the section which the Archbishop himself considered the most important—was passed over by the reporters. The Archbishop had in fact begun by insisting that 'the Church's duty to declare the principles of true social life is not a duty first and foremost to society. It does not arise from the fact that men have a right to claim guidance from it. It is first and foremost a duty to God and arises from the obligation to bear witness to the fullness of the Gospel and the blessings for human life which it contains' (*Church Times*, Oct. 2).

This is most important not only in assessing the value of this particular Anglican meeting but also in keeping perspective in our social activities, in showing the relation of faith and works. Much of the Anglican comment on the meeting insists that the theology of the Church is at last being brought to bear on social problems. The representatives of the I.C.F. who organized it ask that 'the theological background of the Albert Hall meeting' should be recognized. Mr. Maurice Reckitt, speaking in this connection on the radio, said: 'We Christians must go back . . . to our own roots in theological social tradition. . . . The demand for a Christian social order is a demand which must be made on specifically Christian assumptions. It must be a demand less for "reconstruction" than for repentance and conversion' (*Listener*, Oct. 1). The Editor of the *Church Times* emphasizes the same point: 'But the Church must not allow itself to degenerate into a mere agency for social reform, either by failing to insist on the necessity for personal faith or by concealing those dogmatic convictions which are the foundations alike of individual morality and social righteousness.' All this shows a happy unanimity on a fundamental point, and Catholic social workers would do well to ponder it. This way alone lies sanity both in prayer and politics.

The word 'theology' in this context is perhaps a little disconcerting to the ordinary Christian-in-the-street, for it may appear too cerebral and erudite for everyday affairs. The *Tablet* speaks of *doctrine* in this connection, and it would be well to emphasize the fact that all that is required is simply to relate all the central doctrines or dogmas of our faith to daily life in society, bringing the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption to bear on business and war, on home-life and recreation. A leader in the *Observer* (Oct. 4) expresses the widespread

view that it does not matter what you believe so long as you get on with the social work needed to-day. This is one of the greatest and most devastating errors of our day, and it appears in another sphere when it is suggested that the various Christian bodies in England should co-operate in arranging and perfecting society while leaving their own particular doctrines untouched, tucked away out of reach on the top shelf.

Such a view aims precisely at turning the Church merely into another benefit society organized for social reform. To combat such a profoundly irreligious outlook we must show that it is our belief in Original Sin, the Incarnation, the Redemption, and the Blessed Trinity that influences our social action and makes it what it is; it is our religion and our prayer that gives us the power to reform society by the grace of God. Catholic faith, Catholic worship, Catholic prayer, these are socially dynamic once they have gripped the individual member of the Church.

But there is one link which is tragically missing in this influence of religion and prayer upon politics. To read the tenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans must bring to the Christian at least a slight feeling of discomfort, if not of real dismay: 'How then shall they call on him, in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe in him, of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they be sent?'

Apparently there were twenty thousand applications for tickets to the Albert Hall meeting. We may safely assume that the majority were from those who had heard the Gospel preached to them. What of all the millions in England alone who have never heard? Those who never go to church, never spend a penny on a pious pamphlet, nor read the leaflet that is thrust once in a while into their hands, if these are told the social teaching of the Church they will naturally conclude that they are being offered an alternative to Socialism or the *Daily Worker*. Never having heard the fundamental doctrines of the faith, how can they be expected to distinguish between the Christian Social Order and any other Order? Until they know what *Christian* means, who Christ was and what he came to do, they will find nothing to sweep them off their feet in *Rerum Novarum*.

In other words, preachers are needed to break the Word of God to the majority who have never heard. The simplicity of St. Paul's words is cutting. How can they believe unless preachers are sent to them? And what can they believe if all they hear is social teaching? Religion will never have its right and proper influence on politics until the people of the country are in the main Christian. And that

demands the authoritative preaching of Christ and of him crucified. At the present time the Word of God is preached almost exclusively to church-goers, and since they are so small a percentage of the people there is little wonder that such multitudes have no idea who Christ is or what his life means. The prayers in our churches, the preaching from our pulpits, the fraternal charity among our own brethren will have little effect on the social life of the country until, like leaves blown by a boisterous wind, preachers are found constantly reappearing in every street and market-place of the towns and villages of England.

This preaching can no longer be apologetic nor yet merely lay. The time for arguing, heckling and pitting of brains against each other has passed. A crowd cannot argue about Christian things when it knows nothing of them, so that it should not be allowed to hamper the Word of God with debating points. The time has come for the officials of the Church to stand up in the market-place and declare 'This is what the Church of Christ teaches. . . . This is our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . He died. . . . He rose again. . . . He is God.' The authoritative voice of the prophet, of one speaking with authority.

This suggests that professed religious, the monks and friars of the Church, in their distinctive habits should go out into the open and proclaim the Kingdom of God. People will know that the habit clothes a Catholic priest and that he has come with the message of Christ. A layman's working-coat conveys no such impression; standing up there on his soap-box he may be anything from an anti-feminist to a mad hatter. The religious habit dispenses with preliminary introductions. In order to hear and to have faith preachers must be sent to these people, and the Church sends her priests and religious in a very special way.

There must, however, be opportunities for the enquirer to satisfy his desires while the heckler is forestalled. The most efficient course for such preachers to adopt would be to take with them a small band of trained catechists, laymen grounded in Christian doctrine to whom all enquirers would be referred. The personal relationship between questioner and instructor would thus be introduced, a relationship which is lacking where questions are thrown out over the heads of the crowd. The catechist could talk to those with difficulties and enquiries at the edge of the throng.

Such a scheme may seem to hang in the airy sphere of the ideal. Yet it was the method used on a larger scale by St. Vincent Ferrer in his preaching up and down Europe. He travelled always with a large group of helpers—priests, tertiaries and penitents—preached in the open air to tremendous concourses, and left his assistants to reap the

major part of the harvest. The present shortage of priests and the demand for them in the Forces prevents a picked number being devoted exclusively to such a work of evangelization. But if every religious house undertook to preach throughout a specified radius round the house it ought to be possible to cover the whole of England with priests who would not have to forsake their primary work. A few hours every week would almost suffice if they all shared the task. Moreover for their helpers they could use all the lay folk already well prepared by Catholic action such as the Y.C.W., and the existence of the Tertiary should not be forgotten in this context.

The fire of the Spirit of God's love should drive Christ's apostles into the open. Only thus can we lay the foundations for a Christian social order—a simple answer to Christ's words, 'Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as you shall find call to the marriage.' Preachers must thus precede Christ himself, not to speak of the Christian order of things. Only thus can religion begin to enter into politics.

## PRAYER AND POLITICS (I)<sup>1</sup>

NOBODY wants to live in a world that is blind and insane; and if that is what we are heading for, then we had better try to do something about it. Aldous Huxley makes this very plain in his latest book, *Grey Eminence*. One of the main points he makes there is this: that a world totally without prayer would be a world 'totally blind and insane.' His actual phrase is a 'totally unmystical world'; but I am going to keep to the simpler and less misunderstood word 'prayer,' because people sometimes think that mysticism means either a tendency to swoon away at odd moments, or else a sort of permanent woolly-headedness. I am going to use the word 'prayer,' but I don't mean just 'asking for things,' and as I am going to define it, it will agree with what Huxley has in mind. A world totally without prayer would be a world totally blind and insane. 'Where there is no vision the people perish'; and Huxley's judgment of our own world is that we are dangerously far advanced into the darkness.

Now, the first thing to notice about this is that it is not an odd or uncommon view. It is not only Huxley's view; it is the Christian view. It is also the view of all the great religious teachers of the world; and more than that, learned men of all kinds are telling us that this society of ours, the modern Western world, is the only civilisation in the whole of the world's history which has *not* held

<sup>1</sup> A series of Broadcast Talks, by courtesy of the B.B.C. and *The Listener*.