

Comment

Christianity has a near-fatal tendency to become christendom, which is just to say that heresy is a constant threat to the gospel. For christendom is at the root of all heresy. Heresy means, etymologically and historically, making your own selection of the currently more attractive elements of the gospel message while denying the countervailing truths. Heresy, therefore, involves cutting the gospel down to the measure of what is not the gospel; and this is exactly what christendom implies. In the past this had taken the form of the confessional state—and not only in the past. Some countries, such as Ireland, are still struggling to free themselves from what is *de facto*, though not in constitutional theory, an interlacing of religion and nationality. In some Islamic countries, of course, and, it seems, in Israel too, there is not much evidence even of a struggle to separate the two, but what may be for these religions, harmless or even congenial, amounts for christianity to a betrayal of the gospel.

Even when we have abandoned the simple confessional state, there may still remain a kind of cultural christendom for which christianity is restricted by an official philosophy or certain accepted mores. Of course the gospel is not neutral with regard to these things: there are some ways of thought and some forms of behaviour that turn out to be not compatible with the gospel and which christians eventually come to recognise as such and to condemn, just as there are political and social structures of which the christian movement is necessarily subversive. But this does not imply that there is such a thing as an unique christian culture or christian theology, any more than there is a christian state.

The tendency towards cultural christendom may not be overtly heretical, for this involves actually denying the more inconvenient gospel truths, but it may still be latently heretical by ignoring them or finding them not 'relevant'. The deplorable effect of such an identification of christianity with christendom is not only that it excludes some of the complex richness of the tradition but that it excludes some people, or places them on the margins of the Church.

A generation ago the Roman Catholic Church in Britain constituted just such a cultural christendom, and a particularly restrictive one. It was one in which creativity, whether artistic or intellectual, was automatically suspect, and where critical thinking was worse than suspect. It was a time (how difficult it is to imagine it now) when little pamphlets were published to demonstrate to unenlightened 'non-Catholics' the virtues of the Index of

Prohibited Books, an age in which nearly all ingenuity of thought in the Church went into justifying the theological party-line and exposing the errors of outsiders. It was an age in which it was exceedingly difficult to be a liberal minded or even a reasonably well-educated person and yet a Catholic. It was a time when it was matter for startled but smug self-congratulation when some person of eminence in the arts made his or her submission to the Church.

Life was very difficult for the critically minded Catholic in those days, not because of any persecution he suffered (unless he were teaching at some Church establishment) but simply because he felt continually out of place, continually in a kind of bad faith. It was difficult, but not as difficult as it would have been without Laurence Bright. Laurence, who was chairman of the Editorial Board of this journal and who died recently, was one of the very few Catholic priests who showed in practice, and not simply by slogan, that a christian humanism was really possible. He gave hope and encouragement to hundreds who felt that their Church had no use for them and no place for them, that they were at best nuisances and at worst 'bad Catholics'.

The transformation of the Church in this country has been due partly to the work of the continental scholars and theologians of the post-war years that culminated in Vatican II, but locally to the effects of the 1944 Education Act which brought Catholics for the first time in great numbers into the universities. There must have been very few of the students of that first generation who had not met or been influenced by Laurence Bright. He played a major part in the transition through which the Church in Britain was passing. It is because of him and a few others that the growing pains of the Church were not agonising but exciting, that Britain has not, for example, known the bitterness and divisions that characterised the recent history of the Church in France.

Whether in his earlier period (when he was editor of *Life of the Spirit*) when he demonstrated that you could adopt a scientific approach to biblical and historical studies and remain a loyal Catholic, or in his later years (after his work with *Slant*) when he showed the same with respect to a scientific, marxist approach to society, he always tried to stop people from excommunicating each other. He could be not so much caustically as casually dismissive, but his devastating weapons were directed always against the excommunicators. He had some bitter opponents but they were usually from the lunatic fringe of reaction and had almost never met him and known the warmth and charity of his presence.

We hope in this journal to carry on his mission to christians who cannot be accommodated by christendom and to keep alive the inspiration that he gave us. May he rest in peace.

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