

BLACKFRIARS

A MONTHLY REVIEW

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THE WAYS OF GOD

SOME people have fallen into a pious way of referring world events or their own domestic upheavals to the will of God, in such a way as to lead us to suppose that they have some inside information by some back-stair whispering from the Almighty. They fancy that they can see God's purpose in the war, or in the disquieting influence of Russia upon world politics—God is leaving rebellious man to his own devices, or he intends to show man the effects of atheistic materialism. These interpreters will notice the punishment meted out to Hitler and Mussolini and they shake their heads over Stalin or Franco—according to their particular persuasion. The recent swing towards Catholicism in the politics of France, Holland, Italy, Austria and Bavaria, fits the divine plan which has been communicated to these men of more than human wisdom. As for the Labour vote in England, God having shown the justice of our cause by granting us victory wishes now to purge us of some domestic ills, either by showing us the stupidity of state control or by directing our steps thus safely towards the left.

This habit of explaining events in terms of God's Almighty will plays a great part in individual lives. A man will regard his present unhappiness, matrimonial, financial, or physical, as God's way of paying back for some previous infidelity. He may on the other hand make up his mind that God owes him something for his fidelity in the past. He thinks he can see what God is 'getting at' in some chance

encounter with another, or some aridity or sweetness in his own private devotions. On the face of it all this seems a Christian and godly way of seeing everything in terms of the will of God. But for the most part such an attitude is far more human than godly. The conclusions are reached without any spiritual depth, with no waiting upon the Lord. They are facile judgments about the motives and purpose of the supreme God, fathering upon him human pettiness and certainly all the limitations of a human point of view. And since they analyse the divine purpose they naturally lead on to an inspection of the future, so that God is expected to end wars or bring public criminals to justice according to human standards, or at best the individual looks forward to special graces from him to meet special eventualities or requires the direct divine indication as to what his future occupation is to be.

Such superficial judgments are not only foolish; they bear in them the seeds of sacrilege. God's ways are not our ways. It is only the very few who after many years of intense personal purification can say with St Paul: 'No longer I . . .' Only those who have surrendered themselves to the divine way in hidden spiritual union can begin to discern with any surety God's designs by the light of the gift of wisdom. And even they rest in happy wonderment at the mystery of that way which leads to the fulfilment of all good, but which nevertheless does so through valleys of appalling misery and across plains of human complacency and unfeeling mediocrity, passes round great mountains of pride and plunges into deep waters of lust and anger. 'All manner of things shall be well,' certainly, but the wisest saint will not necessarily tell how this or that present mortal sickness is well in that eye of God which sees present in future and future in past, all in one. St Paul, indeed, had been raised to the third heaven, but even from that altitude of wisdom he could cry: 'Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God. How incomprehensible are his judgments, how unsearchable his ways! For who hath known the mind of the Lord?'

God's ways must be mysterious or they would not be divine. If we could comprehend them they would be within the grasp of our understanding, limited and with many alternatives. With God there is no alternative; his way is one way, his will unchangeable. And that one way is infinitely broad, embracing all reality; no human mind could compass it. It is true that looking back it is sometimes possible to trace the path of God's finger moving us up to the present, God's hand moulding races and nations for their rôle in present events. Such a divine plan was officially revealed in the Old Testament; and even now we can glimpse a divine plan in the way an individual was granted the gift of faith or was led to repentance; a divine plan in

the succession of great popes who have ruled the Church since 1870, when the Papacy lost all political power. But the past at least is over and done with; it is something that has been created, and we can admire God's handiwork in it as we admire the divine craftsmanship in a spider's web or the song of a thrush. But we cannot know all about even the thing that is created and completed, a kind of instantaneous glint from a tiny mirror of the divinity. I cannot know all there is to know of this fir tree in my garden, still less about the divine working in my life up to the present moment. So when I come to consider the totality of God's way in the world I must meekly bow before the mystery. The past and the present with the future make a whole in the unique will of God, and to suppose that I can describe that whole or interpret the way of God to myself and others is certainly sacrilegious whether it concerns my own private life or the movement of nations.

What we lack so much today is the Fear of the Lord. Catholics and non-Catholics alike speak with levity about the Lord and his ways, almost as they speak of king, prime minister, or government. It is not merely the dwindling respect for authority that has banished the fear of God. There is surface acknowledgment of his authority in our analysis of his purposes and designs. But a dangerous familiarity with the divine has grown up, a familiarity which shows itself in the popularity of religious novels, films, and plays, as well as in mysticism and theosophy. Baron Corvo was harmless and amusing, at least in his Toto tales. But when he wrote he was almost unique, and he was perhaps honestly witty at the expense of the outer trappings of religion. Now the light-minded approach is camouflaged under a seeming respect for God. There is little awe for God the Father Almighty in films like *The Song of Bernadette*, *The Bells of St Mary's* or *The Keys of the Kingdom*; God and his service seem to have found entertainment value in *All Glorious Within*, and *Brideshead Revisited*. The authors of these works have high ideals and their aim is worthy—to bring religion within the confines of the kingdom of this world. But has the great popularity of such works any real religious significance? How many neophytes has it brought to the font, how many sinners to the confessional? If this popularity springs from a spirit of familiarity with the divine its effects are more likely to be devilish. We have returned so much to the pagan past that a case could be made for a return to the God of the Old Testament, the mighty God of Awe, as a necessary preparation for the Christian message of love.

Lacking the fear of God we drag him into our politics in this purely human way, hoping that he will become an instrument in our designs. We know what he intends to do, for it coincides happily

with our own plans. Such levity of mind will wreck the Christian effort to regain the ground lost in the last centuries. Politics must be raised up, leavened by contact with the divine will. A balanced judgment on world affairs will certainly rest upon the knowledge that there is a plan behind all the flux of human uncertainty and waywardness, but it will not venture to interpret the divine plan in actual detail. A balanced judgment will take stock of the immediate surroundings and judge with prudence on what evidence it can discover. It considers the present situation and advises on future action. Thus a man of prudence knows that God wills that each individual should progress to eternal life, but he does not interpret this as meaning that God has set his heart upon all sorts of progress, such as the Labour Government outlines in Education, National Insurance and Employment. He does not declare either for or against General Franco on the grounds of the divine will for human progress.

Looking ahead we are inclined to live too much in the unreal world of our imagination. If we are at all religious, we picture the future in terms of the will of God; and it is only the realm of our imagination, unreal and with no respect for God. God's will is a present, concrete will. It never leaves the realms of the real, and the only way in which we can approach it is on our knees at the present moment; for the present moment is the only reality for us, the only connecting link with the eternity of God. Eternity is *now* for man as well as for God. Eternity does not run parallel with time, as though it would go on and on for ever day *after* day. There is no future for eternity. The way of God is not a long way; it is the shortest way that man can conceive.

The great spiritual masters like de Caussade have insisted upon the importance of the present moment in the individual's life of grace. The same principle must apply to the whole of life, political, social, and individual. The future must be considered, decisions as to future policy have to be taken in every walk of life. But the future can only be judged correctly in terms of the immediate present. Here only has it any concrete reality. It grows from what is happening, what is in existence at this precise present moment of time. The future has reference to thought and action which I am now engaged in. Therefore preoccupation with spiritual progress is wrong when it becomes unloosed from contemporary graces and becomes involved in what could be, should be, or might have been. A man who fusses about his progress as a rule has a happy picture of himself which carries little reference to reality. The same applies to wider judgments on the social and political scene. The demand for progress usually has no roots in the present. It is based on an ideal picture which has no reference to the concrete will of God nor to present

human needs and frailties. We may congratulate ourselves on the swing towards Catholicism in the government of so many European countries, but if we regard it as anything but a challenge to us here and now to make full use of present opportunities, it will lead once again to political Catholicism and so to disaster. If we think we can discern in this a divine reward for listening to fifty years of papal encyclicals or the divine foundations for a great victory for the Church we shall be committing the sacrilege of identifying the ways of God with human fancies. We must approach the present events in the fear of the Lord, in awe and wonderment at his mysterious way, ready to take his direction when he manifests his will, but all the time searching with prudence for the particular virtues implied in that way.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and we cannot judge wisely about our own lives or the life of nations without that fear.

THE EDITOR.

THE HUSBANDMAN OF THE VISIBLE UNIVERSE

RESPONSIBILITY—IV

HUSBANDMAN' is the word; for, if not wholly adequate, as one word could hardly be, it does, better than any other, express man's status and function in the universe, and especially in the visible universe, so that its immediate concrete sense and the analogies to which it gives rise are verified essentially and verified to the full. Whatever is verified essentially of mankind is verified in Adam, the head of this family, and in Christ in whom this headship is restored. We should beware of any kind of mere generalisation—even the generalisation, 'All men are sinners,' is made at a level quite different from that of such an essential judgment—and emphatically we must not be understood to mean 'in fact men are most commonly tillers of the soil'. Man has the cosmic function of husbandman whether this last statement is verified or not. But then it follows that our meaning is deeper than the level of fact and of generalisations of fact.

We should note that the whole of the sub-human creation is ordained in and through man in the cosmic unity. The sub-human world is not fully a world and not fully a cosmos *by itself*. From it may be drawn suggestions of unity but not really a unity of its own. In man as part (head) of the visible creation, the visible world has