

■ Reformation implies decadence; to say that the Church needs reforming is to say that in some respects she has become deformed. This way of speaking has not been encouraged by the Catholic Church in the past four centuries. Reform of individuals by repentance, yes; reform of religious Orders, yes; but reform of the Church as such, as a whole – until recently that sounded rather Protestant, ‘offensive to pious ears’. And yet Christ never promised his Church that no superstition would ever attach itself to her doctrines, no corruption affect her members; but only that the Holy Spirit would always be there to guide her towards the truth, and that evil would never prevail. Yet during the past four centuries the Church has perhaps succumbed to the evil of thinking too well of herself – collectively that is, and as an institution, for she has never ceased to stress the sins of Catholics as individuals.

But are there sins that these are liable to precisely as Catholics? If so, since these would be collective and common evils, one might expect the rulers of the Church, out of human frailty, somewhat to overlook them for fear of playing into the hands of the enemy. And the enemy – first Luther, and then, on very different assumptions, Voltaire – has called us superstitious and collectively so. Hence it is rather natural that the vice of superstition (for it can be a vice) is not one that the Catholic priesthood, speaking generally, has much taxed itself or its flock with. This is one aspect, an important one, of the lack of Catholic self-criticism in the past.

But the past is past and the Church speaks differently now. She has lately become self-critical to a degree which may fairly be called unprecedented. Nor does this process, even at the highest level, look like stopping at past mistakes and misdeeds, or at the periphery of devotional practice. In the matter of birth control the Vatican Council is now turning a critical eye, if not precisely on moral principles, at least on their customary and never hitherto officially questioned application to practice. To this extent Archbishop Roberts’s well-known plea for official discussion of this matter has been sustained. But Catholic criticism – not official perhaps, but certainly public – of elements in Catholic tradition will assuredly not stop here.

Catholicism is primarily a religion, not an ethical code, and the critical temper operating from within it must inevitably sooner or later proceed to reflect on it as a religion; and so raise, inevitably, the old question of superstition, but this time from within the fold. Thus it is not surprising that *Objections to Roman Catholicism* – a work written by a group of Catholics with the declared aim of openly facing the difficulties they themselves feel in believing and obeying the Church – should lead off with an essay on ‘Superstition and Credulity’; and while one may question the editor’s tactics in placing this essay, the most irreverent in the book, at the beginning, one can admit that he has thus in a way put first things first. Where religion is concerned, the charge of superstition is the most serious of all; and it is also, let us recognize, one to which

Christinaity is *prima facie* very vulnerable.

'Superstition', we are told is 'any belief or practice inspired by an unworthy view of God'. But was it 'worthy' of God to take flesh and be crucified? The question, even if it can be answered affirmatively, is natural, even obvious. Superstition, as a materialization of religion, is Christianity's risk; and one that it can only avoid by a constant spiritual vigilance both in thought and practice. Catholic intellectuals do indeed well to urge us to think worthily of God; but however worthily, that is to say spiritually, we think of the Godhead, we cannot, happily, de-materialize Christ; nor the Church he founded.

■ Moral theology is held in small favour in the Church of England, if some recent remarks of the anonymous author of the always controversial preface to *Crockford* are to be believed. It may be that the associations of legalism and casuistry have discredited a discipline that is hard on situation-ethics. And the isolation of the moral theologian, ploughing a lonely furrow in the ungrateful territory that is supposed to be his, is bad both for morals and for theology.

It is certainly true that there is an inherent English suspicion of a developed science of morals: instinctive judgments are preferred to those that rest on a rigid application of constant principles. And moral theologians, most of all, need to be aware of the biblical insights that give their true depth to theological arguments.

Yet there is a serious lack of informed moral theologians in what might be fairly called the public sector of moral debate. The seminary professor, used to the domestic and professional context of his teaching, is hardly equipped to intervene in controversies that of their nature have little in common with the calm atmosphere of his classroom. The *Crockford* editor complains that no professorship or lectureship in any English university other than Oxford exists for the explicit teaching of Christian morals, and it may well be that the virtual absence of ethics and/or moral theology as a subject of respectable academic status has contributed to the silence, or at best the ambiguity, with which moral questions of public importance have been greeted.

The question, too, has ecumenical implications of some importance. Despite the reservations that some may often have to make on detailed applications of the moral law, there still remains a large area of essential agreement between Christians of very varying allegiances. Yet there is rarely any evidence of the sort of unity which could be an effective contribution to the public debate on issues which profoundly concern the moral conscience. The implications of penal reform are an obvious example, and such matters as racial discrimination and the operation of the Street Offences Act, as well as many more, provide the opportunity for a statement of basic moral principle that is powerful evidence of the real unity that already exists between divided Christians and,

which indeed is shared by many other men and women of good will who would claim no religious allegiance.

It may be that the moralists – and the very term has come to seem disgraceful – have been too quickly discouraged by the radical assaults of the ‘reformers’. They certainly need to learn a new language if they can expect to be heard. But in the meantime much goes by default, and the sentimentalists and the situationists by-pass the processes of reasonable debate because the moral theologian has too often been left powerless with the old-fashioned furniture he has inherited along with the house. That still stands, and its foundations are, fortunately, firm. But the moralist, of all men, needs to be sure that what he has to say must be in terms of the true needs of those he addresses. And that need of theirs is not just an accommodation to the winds of moral change: it is a need of God and his law and his love, however mediated, and he should feel no embarrassment in saying so.

■ ‘Some kinds of *communication* on some kinds of *issues* brought to the attention of some kinds of *people* under some kinds of *conditions* have some kinds of *effects*.’ Such scepticism about what can be really known of the influence of the media of mass communication – and it is a social scientist who is speaking – confirms a general impatience at the large, and often contradictory, claims made for research into the attitudes induced by television. The Television Research Committee was set up by the Home Secretary last year precisely to ‘select and clarify the relevant issues which may prove amenable to scientific enquiry’ and to initiate the appropriate research. Its first report (*The Effects of Mass Communication*, a survey by J. D. Halloran: Leicester University Press, 7s. 6d.) is largely taken up with a survey of already published material, mostly American, and there is a refreshing recognition that ‘although sophisticated social science methods make possible important empirical studies, they may also create the danger that the specific problem under investigation will be shaped by the requirements of method rather than of social relevance.

It is unlikely that research will produce quick answers to the crude questions that are usually asked. It would no doubt be useful if it could be ‘proved’ that violence on television is a ‘cause’ of crime, or that moral attitudes are profoundly modified by the materialist values of so many programmes. But such proof can hardly be forthcoming, if only because it is impossible to isolate television from the general context of a mass culture. There is a multiplicity of causes, commensurate with the whole range of our society, and the most that can be hoped for is to examine a particular area – such as children’s television programmes – with a modest end in view and so achieve some measure of understanding and perhaps of reform.

In an appendix on ‘The Wider Debate’, Mr Halloran raises larger questions which

cannot be answered within the rigid framework of sociological method. 'What is high culture? Can genuine high culture exist in mass society? Is there a clear-cut dichotomy between high culture and popular culture? What standards are to be used? Who decides what is good and bad?' There are optimists who can see a truly popular culture in Beatlemania, just as there are pessimists who would deny the possibility of authentic cultural values in a society that is dominated by the mass media. And there are those – and presumably the Television Research Committee exists to help them – who think that critical evaluation can lead to change and who still have some confidence in the worth of education as a means of reform.

■ At the University of Birmingham, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies has also just issued its first report. Under the direction of Professor Richard Hoggart, it aims at providing the setting for 'a debate about contemporary culture and social change'. The generalities of language inevitably give an impression that is blurred, and the 'critical-evaluative studies in depth' that are to be undertaken in popular fiction, the press, film and television, popular music and advertising, will no doubt be more stimulating than the sociological jargon suggests. It is easy for the academic study of English to become in effect an exercise in nostalgia, and the Birmingham Centre, however gritty its social science assumptions may seem to be, should encourage some valuable cross-fertilization.

■ There have been compliments – and reservations – about the typography of NEW BLACKFRIARS. Readers will notice that, in this and succeeding numbers, we are taking into account the justice of their criticisms.