

Commentary

INTO EUROPE. Catholics, at least, should feel no embarrassment at the prospect of a closer British association with Europe. If Belloc's slogan, 'Europe is the Faith', has been too often quoted in the interests of a Latin imperialism, it is none the less true that European unity was, historically, a religious achievement. And it may well be true that the return of Britain to Europe will in turn have important religious consequences.

Unconsciously, some of the opposition in this country to the new association is coloured by religious suspicions. Even Mr Butler thought it necessary to point out in the House of Commons that the Treaty of Rome 'has nothing to do with Roman Catholicism'. And the vehemence of Lord Beaverbrook's opposition, for instance, may be supposed to have more than economic overtones. The variety, indeed, of the criticisms - from the at least intellectually respectable misgivings of some lawyers at the prospect of a diminution in the standing of the English Common Law to the crude little Englandism of the latter-day Empire builders, or rather Empire brokers - can conceal a fundamental common fear: that there will be a radical change in the notion of national sovereignty once Britain joins Europe.

The Government's arguments are in terms of economic survival: the political, and, so to say, the ideological arguments are deliberately underplayed. And it is plainly impossible to foresee what will be the exact consequences of an association which must of its nature evolve with the years. But it is certain that, if the negotiations succeed, they will mark an end of the old isolationism - conferred, we are so often told, by the geography of an island, but undoubtedly confirmed by centuries of conscious choice.

In the past, British associations with Europe have been highly pragmatic: alliances created by a policy of maintaining a balance of power with military campaigns to implement them. And the suspicions have by no means been confined to Tory imperialists: no one was more bitterly opposed to European Union in the years after 1945 than Ernest Bevin. The most vehement critics are to be found at the two extremes of the political spectrum, to whom, for very different reasons, the prospect of a close connection with the European community - so largely the creation of the post-war Christian Democratic parties - is uncongenial.

The rôle of the Catholics of this country in the rapidly developing European community may not at first sight seem significant. But they, too, have suffered from an isolation that has been the product of political forces and a particular history, and they now have an opportunity to free themselves from some of the limiting inhibitions created by their own history. The great growth of the Catholic population of this country during the last century has owed little to continental Europe, and the currents of Catholic revival in France and Germany in particular have only recently affected opinion in Britain. The spiritual fulcrum of Catholic life in the United Kingdom, has, as it were, been fixed in Rome and in Dublin and nowhere much in between.

The ecumenical consequences of the new association, should it come to pass, could be especially valuable. It may sometimes seem that continental judgments on the Anglican Church have been insecurely based. But it is equally true that English Catholic opinion has much to learn of the evolution of the Church in contexts wider than those of its particular history. It may be hoped that ecclesiastical education, to take only one example, may profit from a lowering of the frontiers. A much more extended system of exchange of ecclesiastical students would do much to widen the horizons of the clergy and make it easier for them to take an active part in freeing the Church from the narrower associations that national loyalties can create. There is no need to insist on the intellectual enrichment that could follow from a much closer relationship between the various Catholic institutions of higher study, and it is to be hoped that the proposed English Institute to serve such a purpose will from the outset realize the new opportunities that there will be.

A reluctant acceptance of the inexorable facts of European economical survival is not a sufficient basis for a British entry into Europe. The Church, as a supra-national body which at the same time respects and nourishes what is authentic in national traditions, can point the way to the deeper implications of a united Europe. It may be that the providential concurrence of the Ecumenical Council and the European movement can present the Church - and all her members - with the challenge that our times demand. For the hopes of ultimate spiritual unity cannot ignore the human situation and the urgent need to create a new society that is based, not merely on economic co-operation and security, but on the foundations of justice and mutual understanding which the Church exists to sanctify.