

A VERNACULAR FAITH

A Personal View

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THE work of Christopher Dawson and others has made familiar the fact that each of the great religions of the world has become the matrix of a temporal culture. Less familiar is the converse truth that such a culture, richly proliferating, can almost smother with the complexities of habit, custom, usage and respectability the faith from which it originally sprang; so that for many selves religion may become at worst the handmaid of civic solidarity, at all events something accepted and taken for granted, and at best a vital pattern of rites, reactions and relationships inherent in a certain place, time, and mode of living, a pattern which fades out of the individual mind directly its circumstances change. Thus, on the one hand stands the '*catholique non-pratiquant*', who clings to the noun rather than the adjective, insists that his children should receive a Catholic education, and has a high regard for faith as the cement of a stable social structure. (This figure is perhaps commoner abroad than in this country; and was well exemplified in those portions of Latin America which abused Costa Rica as 'Communist' for trying to organise economic life in accordance with the social encyclicals.) In the centre sit at ease in Zion, as in an overcrowded drawing-room, ladies of pious leisure embroidering in *petit point* on linen cushion covers ready stencilled designs of the Sacred Heart, such as may be seen in the drapers' shops of Bruges. At the other extreme wanders, say, the French-Canadian peasant who, deeply devout so long as he remains in his accustomed rural surroundings, loses contact with religion when he loses contact with the village group into which he was born, and becomes not an individual member, in whatever mortal context, of the immortal organisation of the Church, but one more disorientated unit of the industrial urban crowd. Beside him may be cited the young African Catholic who comes to Europe as a student and, deprived of his cultural background, loses his spiritual orientation, and too often turns to

Communism for a sense of meaning, of purpose, of belonging to some whole relevant to his new surroundings.

What are the remedies?

First, perhaps, to make it clear to all Catholics, not only the educated but the simple (whose simplicity is too often mistaken for stupidity and cultivated as such, much to their own detriment in unfamiliar situations), that a man lives on many linked levels; consciously, alone to reason and to pray; consciously, again, in given groups, familial, economic, national, to reason, to pray, to interact with his fellow creatures, to work, to co-operate; sub-consciously, with the tensions, the imagery, the pressure of his own submerged self; sub-consciously again, sharing in several collective beings which are given expression, continuity and shape by custom, tradition and various sorts of ceremonial in so far as natural collectivities are concerned, and by familiar liturgical action where religion is in question.

Second, to make it equally clear that though faith should of course be fulfilled and reflected at all these levels, it does not depend on such a complete and continual fulfilment, and can be detached from its dear background of childhood associations and familiar ways; since, though religion may have moulded generation by generation a pattern of culture, it is no more identical with it than God is identical with the universe. Thus, the pattern with which the Church is now most commonly associated is that of the Christendom of the Middle Ages, founded on a system of personal relationships, feudal in the countryside and working through guilds in the small towns; a pattern nostalgically attractive to a rootless generation hemmed in by the buildings, harassed by the advertising, exhausted by the impersonal din of large modern cities, and inclined to feel that man has twice fallen, from grace to nature, and from nature to a state of mechanism (a feeling which reflection on the great age of that ingenious mechanical device the prayer wheel, should do much to dispel). Yet in fact the Church early took root and flourished in a complex urban culture, in large cities of tenement buildings, of mass-entertainments as trivial as those of our own time, and more degrading, of streets noisy with traffic and shouting, and of workers who were not even wage-slaves, simply slaves. The very word 'pagan' originally meant a villager living remote from Christian civilisation.

The third means of remedy should be, wherever it is possible,

to relate faith, at all these levels of human living, to contemporary events, ideas, idioms, preoccupations as they exist; and this again should be done even for the simple, who may, in the world as it is, find themselves at any moment uprooted from their traditional ways by economic necessity, marriage, political planning, or war, and set down in the middle of an alien mode of life.

Consciously, then, they should be trained to think, to relate unfamiliar ideas to lasting truth; otherwise they may risk losing the latter, as did a devout Irish peasant girl brought up on an almost fundamentalist idea of the Creation, who came to domestic service in London, and after a time remarked in quiet despair to her employer that she did not see how she could go on believing what the Church taught, as her boy-friend had told her that science proved that men were descended from monkeys. Luckily the employer was able to suggest that, whatever the truth might be about this physical descent, it did not affect the fact that they had at a definite point been given reasonable souls, and had been created as men. How many others like this girl, however, are going to come up against such points unprepared, and drift away from a religion which has been taught them in so *simpliste* a form as to be completely inadequate in the intellectual climate of the outside world. How many young men, again, go abroad with the Army, and, never having been told of the doctrine of the 'baptism of desire', very rightly revolt against the notion that all non-Christian peoples go to hell.

Consciously, again, the existent natural community—family, village, factory, trades union, district, nation—should be examined with a certain detachment, to see how vividly it expresses and implies religious belief: religious belief as a thing in itself, as distinct both from old, church-bell associations, and new, industrial-hooter hopes. Such a process would at any rate make clear to the uprooted that their faith should depend no more on environment now than on frontiers in the seventeenth century; and reassure the countryman transplanted to the crowded loneliness of an industrial town, and the townsman evacuated into the solitary personal conspicuousness of the countryside, that religion can grow or atrophy in either.

Of course, it should be possible deliberately to design so to speak a culture pattern for Catholicism—or any other religion—by planning secular communities to be worked in accordance with

certain definite principles. In point of fact, however, both process and result have tended to be brittle and artificial and short-lived. Such groups, constructed in accordance with a blue-print intellectually imposed from above, instead of developing from roots in time and place and habit, have hardened into theocracies, like Calvin's Geneva; or gone bankrupt; or survived for a time to give an unfortunate impression that religion is indissolubly united with such secular cults as that of 'home-made pottery and hand-knitted toasting forks'; or have simply disintegrated under the pressure of the world without. True culture patterns, in fact, like poets, are born, not made.

More practicable than the attempt either to reorganise society at large, or to form within it a number of completely self-sufficient groups, is the acceptance, use and transformation of the existing state of affairs as it is, and from within; a task undertaken on a consciously religious basis by the J.O.C., and by the priest-workman movements in Belgium and France; and incidentally handled, as the by-product of a search for human well-being, by the founders and staff of the Peckham Experiment, who for many years sustained an organic community in the arid urban surroundings of South London, and, during the course of purely scientific investigations into the optimum conditions of family health, restated in biological terms the ancient philosophical concepts of natural law.

They wrote in one contemporary idiom. The J.O.C. and the priest-workmen find themselves of necessity using others, the vocabularies of the great new industrial bodies in which they inhere. As a corollary, they must also use, at any rate by implication, the imagery and the sensory media familiar to the persons of whom these bodies are composed. This process should probably go further than it does at present. Already in America it is said that the strip cartoon is being used as a means of giving religious instruction to children. In this country at least one large 'comic' has been running such a cartoon, devoted to the highly pictorial adventures of St Paul. He is shown, however, with an accuracy more historical than emotional, with his head in a *recherché* oriental teacosy, and his arms encumbered by draperies; a fate similar to that which almost invariably overtakes St Joseph and the shepherds in nativity plays, making them instantly into far-away long-ago figures, too picturesque to have much to do with

here and now. It is time that the twentieth century should, like other epochs, visualise the Incarnation in contemporary terms, and not as a costume piece staged in accordance with careful good taste and scrupulous historical exactitude; it is time that our Lord was born in a derelict garage to a displaced girl in an old coat and a headsquare, looked after by an elderly engineer in a battered mackintosh from the army surplus clothing depôt. Then they will be recognised as real people; then the impact of God-made-Man will no longer be muffled by aesthetic draperies.

This is the kind of imagery, alive with associations, spontaneously evocative, which is familiar to the individual mind today. In what liturgical, even in what ritual action, is it to be merged, so that separate humans may feel, and know and express their unity in adoration:

It must be faced that, except in the few churches where congregations are encouraged to make the responses, Mass does not provide anything of the kind. The plea for a liturgy in the vernacular, with a congregation able both to understand and to respond aloud, is an old one, and may one day succeed; until then, if its setting cannot be in the unchanging Gregorian mode, beating from one generation to another the echo of eternity into time, there is surely a strong case for its being in the vernacular musically. Not necessarily, alas, even in the modern 'educated' vernacular of, say, Benjamin Britten, for here, as in the other arts, there is a widening gulf between the taste of the connoisseur and that of the general public; but in the idiom of those songs which are nearest to folk-music in our generation, the idiom in which even children begin to make up tunes, the *Harry Lime Theme*, *Buttons and Bows*, and, best of all, the Negro spirituals, in whose sombre beauty highbrow and lowbrow can be reconciled.

Thus, then, if a culture is neither to smother faith with respectability and 'good taste', nor so deeply to colour it as make people incapable of differentiating between traditional pattern and spiritual impulse, both detachment and creative energy are needed: the first in order to distinguish and to cherish the roots of faith where they spring in eternity; the second in order to give that faith ever new individual and civic and sensory and communal expression through all the changes of time.