

# Objections to Roman Catholicism

by Kenelm Foster, O.P.

When I was young a book with this sort of title<sup>1</sup> and written by Catholics would have been intended as an answer; the Church would have been defended. One can plausibly imagine some of the contributors: Belloc and Chesterton, not yet, respectively, too old or dead; Fathers Martindale and McNabb; Mr Waugh speaking for youth and perhaps Eric Gill (a bit uneasy with some of the company) for art. Count de la Bedoyère's team are of a different kidney. All but two of them seem far more concerned to raise than to answer objections, and if the formula of our imaginary book might have been 'Yes, but . . .', that of the present one is rather 'Yes, and . . .', followed by a strong recommendation that it is high time something was done about it. The common mood, in short, is one of protest, the common aim is reform. Hence it isn't surprising, given the Church's established structure, that the general tone may fairly, if loosely, be described as anticlerical. And it is perhaps here, rather than in the particular views and arguments put forward, that this book's chief interest and significance lies, – not, of course, simply in its being slanted towards anticlericalism, but in its being so in a new, contemporary way.

In the twenties and thirties there were currents of anticlerical feeling in English Catholicism, but they were small and scattered, and, more important, they neither claimed nor expected much support from theology. They were a relatively superficial irritation against clerical 'stuffiness' and self-interest; and so they remained even down to and during the Spanish Civil War. Not that the irritation was not sometimes fierce: it is fierce enough in some of Gill's later writings and Denis Tegetmeier's cartoons; but in general it drew on no reserves of serious theology or Church history. The discontented men of letters and artists who wrote anonymously, and wittily, in the now forgotten review *Order* had no theological pretensions, even when (how strange this now seems in the world of *Search* and *Slant*!) they quoted the formulas of Thomist philosophy. Then, as the thirties went by the criticism became less aesthetic, more earnest, and of course more political: Catholic discontent moved Right or Left, but mostly Left. *Colosseum* was a voice of the latter trend and Maritain, supported by some English Dominicans, was its prophet; but despite these authorities – or even in a sense because of them (for when Thomism enjoys high prestige with the laity, as it then still did, so does

<sup>1</sup> Edited by Michael de la Bedoyère. *Constable, 18s.*

its rather daunting rational techniques) – the anticlerical strain in that trend remained theologically rather inarticulate: it lacked a theory of the layman's place in the Church and a historical analysis of the clergy's. What had so far emerged was hardly more than a vague sense that the Church's structure had grown somewhat lop-sided. It was only with the theological ferment (on the Continent) of the forties and fifties, and in particular, I think, with the writings of Père Congar, that the needed clarifications came. The editor of this book, in a rather effusive introduction, insists on linking it with Pope John's *aggiornamento*, but Père Congar must also take his share of the credit, though he might perhaps be reluctant to in view of some of the contributions. In any case the book as a whole, I think deeply marked by his influence, direct or indirect, and derives what value it has largely from him.

Lay criticism in the Church has, then, become theologically conscious. And this is to be welcomed in principle; but in practice there are certain elementary rules to be observed, even when one is criticizing; rules that govern any and every intellectual debate: exactness, objectivity, a respect for one's opponent and one's audience, a sedulous avoidance of jeering. These good qualities are as manifest in some of these essays, notably Mrs Haughton's and Mr Todd's, as they are inconspicuous in others, notably Mrs Goffin's and Mr Pollard's. Nor, clearly, do a critic's courage and good intentions give him any right to immunity from counter-criticism, as the editor seems to imply when he weakly hopes that 'any weaknesses' will be 'overlooked' (Introduction, p. 13).

I have not the space here to comment adequately on even the more obvious weaknesses in Mrs Goffin's assault on Catholic superstition and Mr Pollard's on Aquinas; I must however record my impression that the intrinsic quality of these two essays would have greatly benefited by the authors' remembering their manners. Mrs Goffin's in particular is thick with gibes and caricature; which is not by any means to deny it all value, but only to warn the reader that this should be carefully unwrapped from a rhetorical tissue as confusing as it is impolite. Her method is to take a point of Catholic doctrine – hell, purgatory, indulgences, the sacraments – and, having conceded that it contains *some* truth, go on to smother with indiscriminate abuse the implications drawn from it, or that have been or could be drawn from it, in Catholic teaching and practice. The relevant word here is 'indiscriminate' and had I the space I could easily justify my using it.

The next three contributors – Mr John Todd on the 'Worldly Church', Mr F. Roberts on certain warpings of the psyche that only too easily accompany a Catholic upbringing, and Professor H. Finberg's on Censorship – are more modest and moderate in criticism, though the Professor is astringent enough to offset nicely the remarkable mildness of Mr Todd; but (if a cobbler may mention leather) to one who has

grown used to Dante, almost anyone else's strictures on worldiness in clerical politics must seem relatively mild. And this brings me back to the teasing subject of the difference between past and present Catholic anticlericalism, understood in the broad sense of a readiness to find fault with priests while accepting their legitimate authority. A few tentative words on this theme may serve to bring me to the two other essays to which I wish to draw particular attention, Mrs Haughton's and Mr Pollard's.

What is novel, I suggest, about contemporary Catholic anticlericalism (understanding this expression in the sense indicated) is that it represents a shift of emphasis from the moral defects of the clergy to their intellectual assumptions – in particular to a set of often hardly conscious assumptions concerning their authority over the laity. The central principles of this authority, based on the sacrament of Orders and the defined structure of the hierarchy, are safe from criticism within the Church; not so a peripheral incrustation of ideas, images and attitudes accumulated through the centuries, inherited as a tradition and taking effect in legislation. But it isn't at all easy, speaking generally, properly to assess and evaluate the various elements in this complex of thought and practice: for one thing, emotions are so quickly provoked on either side; for another, the assumptions involved are themselves confused. The clergy as a body, with their own *esprit de corps* and segregated training, have rather tended to assume that the development of their authority in the Church has been wholly beneficial to the Bride of Christ – a very questionable assumption as soon as one begins to distinguish between the essential principles involved and their historical expression in positive law, not to speak of customs, common attitudes and accepted imagery. Père Congar has shown, for example, how the disastrous quasi-identification of the clergy with the Church *tout court* had – until recently – become such a clerical 'assumption'; and when this blended with the image of 'Mother Church' the effect was to reinforce, through an unconscious misuse of the adult-and-child analogy, an assumption that the priest as such was the best judge of what the layman ought to think on *all* really serious matters; and then Mother Church, having assumed a clerical face, begins to seem a tyrant: she can never be wrong and must not be criticized. Against this 'sinless abstraction' Mrs Goffin has a bitter outburst that should certainly not be ignored.

But it is Rosemary Haughton, in her fine and subtle essay – much the best in this book, I think – on 'Freedom and the Individual', who really helps one to *understand* what has gone wrong. The point she very convincingly brings out, from an obviously authentic and deeply considered experience of human life and love, is that authority is ultimately of no use to the human psyche unless it leads beyond itself. It is a means, not an end; and its end is an interior freedom of the soul, precisely because without freedom there is no love and without love there is no *achieved*

Christianity at all. Church authority belongs within an order that far transcends it; and if, as we believe, it is an indispensable part of that order, so much the more reason for keeping its medial and ministerial character clearly in view; for otherwise the needful stress on its necessity will tend to raise it to the status of an end, making Christian life in this world chiefly a matter of blind obedience to its decrees. If the current criticisms of Church authority, past and present, are valid, this must be because the authority which the clergy rightly claim has in practice got somehow out of *order*, out of perspective, out of place in the totality of Christian living. Its primary function is the apostolic one of mediating God's Word to human minds; but in exercising this function the clergy, of course, are recipients of the Word, are believers, just as the laity are; and precisely as believers are on exactly the same level as their flock – waiting for the revelation of the sons of God and the end of their own brief authority. And because they are servants of a Word which they do not and cannot fully comprehend, so too the human mind to which they mediate that Word is in a real sense beyond their comprehension; it has an infinite 'reach', it is *capax Dei* (even, potentially, by nature). And this is where Mr Pollard's furious attack on St Thomas and the scholastic tradition comes in. It is a curious piece – grossly over-confident, un-scholarly, and as a critique of *authentic* Thomism quite misguided; but as a protest against a certain 'downgrading', in potted scholasticism, of the natural energies of man's soul it has, I am sure, its value. It combines with the rest of this very uneven book to stimulate fresh thinking; that at least one can say.

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