

Two distinguished contributors to *New Blackfriars*, Mr Walter Stein in the last issue of this review and Mr Brian Wicker in *The Guardian* of May 11, have written public letters to explain why they can no longer contribute to this review. In spite of differences of tone and emphasis, they make the common point that to continue to contribute would be to collaborate in an institution of the Church which has so discredited itself by its actual working that continued collaboration would imply complicity in a moral evil and so constitute in fact an objective denial of the authentic purposes of the Church which their contributions would hope to serve; Mr Wicker thinks that these purposes would now be better served in other publications, lay-controlled and owned.

These declarations of conscience, carefully and painfully weighed, are hardly open to a direct reply. They demand our sympathy and respect, especially since they are so obviously the expression of a sincere sympathy with what seems to the writers the 'almost impossible' plight of the English Dominicans. But what of the conscience of the English Dominicans themselves? No family allegiance, at once more inclusive and more demanding than that of friendly co-operation alone, could protect them from the charge of complicity in evil if the case is just that described by Mr Stein and Mr Wicker. No vow of obedience can compel a religious to obey against his conscience.

How can English Dominicans, Fr Herbert included (and let it be said again that there is absolutely no restriction which would prevent him from contributing), continue to write for *New Blackfriars*? Let us simply take for granted family loyalties of a genuine but not absolutely decisive kind: *these* wouldn't do just by themselves. More seriously, there is the consciousness of a specific mission of the Dominican Order, a mission which is more real than any individual member's version of it, the Master General included: more real, because (so it seems) inscribed in the mission of the Church as a whole, and defectively realized in every member of the Order, the Master General and the present writer included. Now it must be allowed that this real mission can be so gravely compromised by the choices and decisions of members of the Order as to make explicit dissociation from them binding in conscience; and here one can no longer postpone consideration of the actual facts of the 'McCabe affair' and their interpretation.

It can surely be said that no one is sufficiently informed about the affair to be able to distribute responsibility and culpability fairly: certainly the present writer is not. The assertion is not merely a knowing allusion to unrevealed intrigues of backstairs diplomacy; these are precisely what is objectionable. Nor is it the empty (because universally true) affirmation that human affairs are too complex in detail for any human insight to master: after all, moral decision must rely simply on morally sufficient information. The point is that the morally sufficient information available in this affair discloses a complex of responsibilities of different degree which would make faintly naive the supposition that simple severance of connexion could keep one's hands clean—supposing that one could ever have clean hands. One would like to think that persons so obviously capable of taking the complex sense of novel or drama as Mr Stein or Mr Wicker would be ready to acknowledge that human affairs in the raw can exhibit a complexity which is all the more baffling for being disordered and confused. By way of example, I myself accept responsibility as sleeping censor for *New Blackfriars*, although my formal activity as censor was only required for a single issue; should I not confess my culpability in failing to urge informally objections and criticisms, or even to counsel different tactics, on those half-dozen occasions when I personally differed from Fr Herbert? (It is of course an over-simplification to suppose that the Master General acted on the basis of a single sentence or a single article; and censorship for *New Blackfriars* has not been the anonymous declaration of an authoritarian *Non*.) It may be that there are others who have to re-examine their consciences on just this point; at any rate, I share Mr Dummett's view, expressed in the last issue of *New Blackfriars*, that not every current reinterpretation of Christianity can be called Catholic, and it seems to me that a fairly widespread failure to disclaim some of these reinterpretations qualifies the obviousness of claims made for freedom of speech and writing. This sort of freedom demands more searching mutual criticism of a theologically informed kind than I am conscious of seeing in English journals of advanced Catholic opinion. It is the failure to acknowledge some share of responsibility in this sense that to my mind weakens the case of those who feel that the failure of authority to reverse its original decision by reinstating Fr Herbert amounts to a finally unacceptable betrayal of human freedom and dignity in at least one limited area of the Church. Why does one have the sense that the burden of conversion, of 'turning again', is imposed solely on the authorities? Is there no relevant sense in which those who reprove the action of authority in this case themselves share the responsibility for this action?

To argue the complexity of the issues involved need not be an evasion of the obligation to clarify the complexities by taking a simple stand: the acceptance of complexities can also be a stand. To

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*New Blackfriars* seems to me an excellent place to do both these things, if I am allowed to. (Perhaps I shall not be allowed to. But to be slung out is a very different matter from choosing to go.) To do so does not seem to be any kind of 'politic makeshift or compromise' provided I say what I really think, after due consideration. *New Blackfriars* is a Dominican work. The Order, like the Church, is a mixture of sin, silliness, sense and sanctity. If I refuse to have anything to do with the first two I can hardly expect to share in the last two, and I need to.

There are things going on in the Church, as a matter of normal practice, that are so disgustingly unchristian that even to think of them makes one feel sick. There is also, as a matter of normal practice, the kind of heroic love that shouts the message of resurrection so that it echoes for miles around. Both of these are the behaviour of the Church; we can't have one without the other. A writer's job, then, is to reflect both, and try to show both for what they are by the light of the gospel. To withdraw from the corruption is to withdraw from the glory. That thoroughly suspect character, the Samaritan, embraced the corruption not because he approved of it but precisely because he didn't. Perhaps he realized the presence of a glory that the more fastidious failed to discern. Perhaps, discussing the incident later, the Priest referred to the men who tried to do something about the evil as 'irresponsible', while the Levite disagreed and called him 'courageous'. But neither of them did anything to help the wounded man. It is the Samaritan we are expected to imitate, and I don't see how one can 'do likewise', however clumsily and inadequately, unless one is prepared to get dirty.

Yours, etc.,

Oswaldkirk,  
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ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

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continue to promote *New Blackfriars* need not be, for Dominicans or others, merely a matter for domestic loyalties in a pathetic effort to conceal obsolescence: it would be an acceptance of the real complexities of the human situation of the Church, and to contribute, by way of the 'theological analysis of contemporary experience' (to use Fr Provincial's phrase), to their salutary clarification. In that work of clarification, Mr Stein's and Mr Wicker's declarations of conscience surely find their place.

CORNELIUS ERNST, O.P.