

## FRENCH ANTI-CLERICALISM

There are few countries the world knows better than France; yet few countries are less understood. Nearly all the opinions which foreigners are accustomed to express about France appear, to the eyes of a Frenchman, to be tainted with error or, at very least, to be unfair generalisations.

Will this be thought a mere reaction of patriotic pride? A refusal to recognise ourselves in portraits which do not flatter us? Perhaps; but it is not only that. For a Frenchman will, as often as not, refuse to recognise himself in foreign portraits which flatter him as well as in some he finds less gratifying. Even before criticising what is said of him, he is suspicious, mistrustful.

For he is aware even though he be incapable of analysing it, of the immense complexity of France and things French. France is a nation with a long history, wherein a great variety of traditions intermix and intertwine. Her apparent cohesion, however striking it may seem to the foreign observer, covers an astonishing diversity of very variegated provincial families, and, in the phrase of Maurice Barrès, of "spiritual families." Monsieur Durand and Monsieur Lévy may be as alike as twin brothers, but they are nevertheless profoundly different. And if Monsieur Durand is a native of Paris, and Monsieur Lévy saw the light at Mulhouse, the difference will be very great indeed. The swarmings of parliamentary parties and groups, the rise and fall of a bewildering variety of political formations and of literary cliques—with all of which the foreigner observer finds it very hard to keep peace—bear ceaseless and ever changing witness to the truth of this.

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Foreign views of French anti-clericalism are apt to be particularly distorted; foreign generalisations about it particularly sweeping and misleading. Until the rise of Soviet

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Russia, France was generally understood to be the most anti-clerical—even the most anti-religious—country of the world. Even to-day something of that idea persists, and Nazi Germany, persecutor of every religion, knows well how to employ the lingering legend to its own best advantage in its world-propaganda.

Only a short while ago an eminent Italian prelate passing through Paris was astounded to see French priests wearing their cassocks in public, and he congratulated them on their courage. He really believed that to go about the streets of Paris in ecclesiastical dress was to risk one's life!

France, an essentially anti-clerical country? . . . It is easy to say it. But the facts do not support so sweeping an affirmation.

It is true that the French Government remains definitely "laïque" and that to the extent of preserving its "neutrality," not only with regard to religious denominations, but even with regard to God Himself. It is true, too, that the Government-controlled schools in France are also "neutral," with a "neutrality" that is sometimes accompanied by dissimulated, or overt, hostility towards religion. It is true that the laws for the expulsion of the religious Orders passed in 1901 and 1904, remain unrepealed and unmodified on the statute book.

But, notwithstanding the letter of the law, Religious of all Orders live and flourish in France; they build new monasteries and convents, they carry on and develop their work, they recruit new members, they prosper. All that in the full light of day. And when Monsieur Blum, Socialist and Jew, accorded the one and only newspaper interview of his ministerial career, it was to a Catholic paper demonstratively edited and directed by a group of Friars!

The "neutral" schools, the laicised colleges and lycées, even the State controlled elementary schools, the great strongholds of anti-clericalism, have produced an élite of Christian teachers and students. Catholic influence is uppermost in the institutions for higher education, the Universities and "Grandes Ecoles"; in the secondary schools, that

influence is considerable; in the elementary schools it is beginning to be felt, so much so that the (Socialist) National Syndicate of Teachers is becoming very anxious about it.

The Popular Front Government—the most “Left” that France has ever known—accorded a magnificent reception to the Papal Legate Cardinal Pacelli, on the occasion of his visit to Lisieux. The President of the Republic attended the religious solemnities of the re-construction of Rheims Cathedral. And when, quite recently, Monsieur Jean Zay, President of Public Instruction, opened a new “refuge” in the Alps, it was to the accompaniment of the blessing given by a priest from Chamonix.

In all this, certainly, there may be plenty to bewilder the uninitiated foreign observer.

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Another false idea which is current outside of France is that which makes a hard and fast opposition between the old Royalist France, “eldest daughter of the Church,” and the France of to-day, champion of anti-clericalism, eldest daughter of the Revolution.

But French anti-clericalism is not a thing of yesterday, nor was it begotten of the French Revolution; neither the political anti-clericalism of the civil authorities nor the “popular” anti-clericalism of the masses.

We must distinguish clearly between these two forms of anti-clericalism. The first is essentially pragmatic. Its primary concern is opposition to any encroachment on the temporal order by the spiritual, and in this we may recognise its justice. But this in practice comes to mean opposition to the just and regular claims of the spiritual order. Sometimes this form of anti-clericalism has taken the shape of an attempt to utilize spiritual forces for its own political ends. Examples in history will be recalled: Philippe le Bel’s brutal treatment of the unhappy Boniface VIII by his hired assassins; Charles VII and Louis XI tightening their hold on the French clergy by the Pragmatic Sanction; François I trying to wrest from the Church a concordat for the benefit of the French Monarchy; Louis XII supporting and impos-

ing Gallicanism and entering into conflict with the Papacy regarding the "Régale" (tax on vacant Bishoprics); Louis XV expelling the Jesuits; Louis-Philippe, the bourgeois and anti-clerical monarch, amazed by the faith of a Montalembert. . . . To say nothing of Napoleon who attempted a sort of compromise between the tradition of the Revolution and the traditions of monarchical absolutism.

The leading supporters of this long tradition of official French anti-clericalism were the Court lawyers—such as that Nogaret who insulted Boniface VIII—and in later years the parliamentarians. The great jurist Portalis, who framed the "Articles Organiques" appended unilaterally by the State to the Napoleonic Concordat, was perhaps the best example of the type. And it was from among these jurists, formed by the absolutist traditions of Roman Law, that the Revolution recruited an important element in its personnel. Its anti-clericalism was, therefore, a heritage from Royalist times, a heritage which it increased and enhanced considerably under the influence of the teaching of the philosophers of the "age of Enlightenment." The Revolution made a theory and doctrine of what had been hitherto only political tactics or lawyers' chicanery. But it created nothing new.

"Popular" anti-clericalism was a very different thing, but its history is quite as ancient. We can see it already in the fables and the vernacular verses of the middle ages. It was neither a doctrine nor a nicely calculated tactical policy. It was rather the expression of a spirit of criticism, always prone to satire, and sometimes of a certain bitterness brought about by the presence of abuses which were all too real. But sometimes it has been occasioned by less noble feelings—envy, jealousy, the touchy self-assertiveness of the rising bourgeoisie. Such anti-clericalism was not incompatible with a serene religious faith and a more or less fervent practice of the Christian life.

With the Renaissance and the Wars of Religion a third type of anti-clericalism began to make its appearance. It is already installed, powerful but obscure, under the reign of Louis XIV and with the "libertine" current that accom-

panied it. We find it in the full light of day in the time of the Regency and under Louis XV among the "philosophes" and the encyclopædists. It was soon to split up into subsidiary forms and tendencies; Voltaire and his disciples concentrated their attack on the clergy and revealed religion; Helvetius went to the extremes of atheism; Rousseau invented the Neo-Christianity of the *Vicaire Savoyard*. But of these the strongest tendency, that which corresponded most successfully to the French mentality and to that of the triumphant bourgeoisie, was that of Voltaire, himself a Parisian and a bourgeois.

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All these three traditions have contributed something to French anti-clericalism as it still lingers to-day.

If we would analyse contemporary anti-clericalism in France into its component factors, we shall find in the first place an intellectual anti-clericalism—coherent and dogmatic. Truly this element, very influential during the last century, in the days of Gambetta, Jules Ferry and Clemenceau, is no longer representative. The vast majority of French intellectuals is Catholic, or sympathetic towards Catholicism, or at the very least without hatred or hostility towards Christianity. Exception must be made of the Marxists and their like, who are pretty numerous, but who are anti-religious rather than anti-clerical; and for that very reason the danger which they present is of quite another kind.

I think that the last and most faithful representative of the old intellectual anti-clericalism is Alain; but I must add that old age seems to be doing even him a lot of good, and that even his anti-clerical ardour is beginning to cool.

The anti-clericalism of the elementary school-teachers seems to be a decadent form of this intellectual anti-clericalism. It would be a great mistake to suppose that all the elementary school-teachers are anti-clerical. Among them are to be found good Catholics, some who are indifferent, and a good number who follow their anti-clerical leaders sheeplike, without much knowing or caring why. If it is said that the

majority of school-teachers is anti-clerical—and of that I am not very sure—their anti-clericalism is nevertheless a queer amalgam of superficial Marxism, of old-fashioned radical Republicanism, of positivism, of Voltairianism, and . . . of the spirit of rivalry. (For both in the small and medium size villages, the influence of the teacher rivals directly that of the Curé—sometimes, alas, even on the electoral platform. And if all school teachers are not geniuses, every Curé is not a Curé d’Ars.)

Further down the list of anti-clericals—much further down—we meet with the various “Freethinkers’ Societies,” composed for the most part (I am sorry to say it but it is the truth) of imbeciles and brawlers. Among their members are found plenty of Anarchists—the least intelligent of the Anarchists. The strength and influence of these societies was at one time pretty considerable. They are now reduced to nearly zero, save only in a few backward provinces where the tactlessness of certain local Catholics revives them from time to time for a fresh campaign on the subject of “scandals.”

Hiding behind intellectual anti-clericalism is Freemasonry. Freemasonry is still very powerful, but incalculably less so than before the war. It complains much of its failure to gain new membership among the young, and it is a prey to very serious internal divisions. “Il pleut sur le Temple.” It is a critical time for French Masonry.

This doctrinaire anti-clericalism is represented by a few periodicals. Of these some, like *Le Calotte*, which is hardly read nowadays except by a few elderly shoemakers (I speak literally), are frankly ignoble. Others are more reputable; like *La Lumière* over which pontificates the citizen Louis Perceau, *ultimus doctor* of the old French anti-clericalism.

Turning to contemporary political anti-clericalism, it should be remarked that there is here a sharp division between the Communists (S.F.I.C.) and the Socialists (S.F.I.O.). The former loudly repudiate the old bourgeois anti-clericalism, but announce themselves as anti-religious, and try in some fashion or another to reconcile their doctri-

naire atheism with the political policy of the *main tendue* (united front with the Christian workers). Bourgeois anti-clericalism has taken up its abode with the Socialists. But here there are exceptions among certain intelligent and educated members of the party, such as M. Léon Blum. But the average Socialist at the present time seems to be anti-clerical rather than anti-religious. The Radical Party, whose anti-clericalism was at one time both theoretic and political, has now solemnly broken with anti-clericalism through the mouthpiece of its president, M. Campinchi; but Masonic influences are still very strong among the Radicals.

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Political anti-clericalism is in abeyance. It no longer has any pretext for existence. Although never before have the Catholics of France been so strongly organised, yet at the same time never have they been so independent of political factions and coteries. Although never before has the French Episcopate shown so great a solicitude for temporal affairs, yet this is done without compromise of the Church with any party or coalition. From this standpoint it is impossible to praise too highly the policy of men like Cardinal Verdier who have been able at one and the same time to go right to the heart of the social problems of our time and yet keep out of the political arena. This conduct has won almost unanimous respect for French Catholics, and, in the Communist policy of the *main tendue*, however much we may distrust it, we may see a proof of the respect it has inspired outside the Church. It has become customary to recognise Catholicism as a force that must be reckoned with—a free and independent force, outside and above the parties.

It is among certain parties of the Right, and notably in Action Française, that political anti-clericalism has now found its home. It is difficult for many of those Rightists to forgive the Church—which they had always understood to be their natural ally—for this very freedom and independence. They see them as a cowardly compromise with the hated Left. They give vent to their ill-humour in incessant recriminations against the “Christian Reds.” And in their

eyes the most Red among them are, as is fitting, the Cardinals. \* \* \* \*

There remains for consideration "Popular" anti-clericalism, the anti-clericalism of the common people. This is something very difficult to define, for it is nothing more definite than a vague sentiment. It is a complex sentiment to which many very different factors contribute. There is in it an element of good-humoured "blague" about the "Curés." An element of ill-defined distrust of the "hommes noirs" in whom traditional superstition fears a bearer of bad luck which exercises some dark power over wives and upsets the harmony of family life (*La Bigotte* by the anti-clerical playwright Jules Renard is instructive on this element)—an uncanny force which entices daughters into convents and sons into seminaries. There is an element, too, of resentment against these preachers of disagreeable truths and inconvenient morality, everlasting kill-joys and wet-blankets. There is an element of human respect and pride, religious practice being considered unworthy of a grown-up male. Finally there is an element of jealousy of these talkers of Latin who, even though born of the people and living as the poorest of the poor, are yet more educated than the ordinary run of men and have white hands unmarked by the signs of manual toil. The old Radical anti-clericalism could make good capital out of this complex of popular sentiment.

But this anti-clericalism is full of contradictions. The anti-clerical is indignant at the thought that the Curé should exercise any influence over his wife, but all the same he sends her to church, for "women must have religion"; and besides, she prays for him, "and after all, one never knows. . . ." He is afraid for his children lest they get the idea that they have a religious vocation, but all the same he sends his sons to Catechism and his daughter is *en pension* with the "good Sisters." He mocks at, or makes light of, holy things, but he takes care to be married in church, to have his children christened, and he claims for himself a religious funeral—"one cannot die like a dog." He runs



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down the Curés, but he finds that, after all, his own Curé is a fine fellow and "if all others were like him we could get along with them all right" (in contrast to the Catholics who usually have a high opinion of priests in general but make an exception of *their own* Curé, because they are constantly comparing him with an abstract ideal).

This kind of anti-clericalism seems to be, it must be admitted, an essential trait of the French character. But even this has been weakening in recent years. The war which mingled priests and people in the comradeship of the trenches has dissipated much prejudice. Moreover, a new generation of young priests has arisen who are active, alive, joyous, very close to the people. The Frenchman of to-day sees something of the lives of the parish priests and their vicaires; he knows their poverty and devotedness; he values the fine work of movements like the Catholic Scouts and the J.O.C. All these things have compelled him to revise his judgment about the clergy of his country.

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To sum up. Intellectual anti-clericalism is in decay. Political anti-clericalism is, for the time being, dormant. Popular anti-clericalism exists, but it is on the wane.

Are then, French Catholics to do nothing but rest in complacent satisfaction? No. For none of these three forms of anti-clericalism is yet altogether extinct. And none of them will be altogether extinct before the day of Judgment. French Catholics are called upon to take advantage of the lull in the storm for the deepening of their Christian lives and for the conquest of souls for Christ. They have already re-occupied territories which had been thought for ever wrested from them. They must prevent the revival of anti-clericalism itself, and one of the best means for that is to deprive anti-clericalism not only of every pretext for existence, but even of every appearance of such pretext. They must see to it that if the Church and clergy are attacked again it will not be on account of their human failings and faults, but solely on account of their fidelity to the truth that is in Christ Jesus.

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