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THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT

THERE is one significant mark of our declining culture which deserves particular notice—the separation of the external side of religion from the internal. Just as a man in his prime finds no opposition between his body and soul, but rather lives as a single yet complex whole, so a healthy civilisation finds its highest expression in a religion which harmonises into a single whole the interior spirit of charity with the exterior structure of rubric, law and hierarchy. But when decay sets in these necessarily complementary elements begin to separate out into opposition and falsehood. The legalism of the pharisee is set over against the puritanism of the communist. Thus at the beginning of the thirteenth century the external life of the Church was seriously encrusted with comfortable clergy, while the interior spirit seemed to be limited to groups of the laity, fermenting in a way that often resulted in schism or heresy. Hence the friars were sent to re-establish unity in religion. The rise of Puritanism in the seventeenth century reveals the separation of the two elements still more clearly. When religion ceases to give life to a people those for whom it represents a vested interest over-emphasise the external rules of worship and ecclesiastical etiquette, while those who see a need for new vitality attempt a short cut to the good life by means of some sort of mysticism and fraternity which sidesteps formal religion.

We begin to see something of that separation to-day. There is a marked revival of interest in mysticism and 'community' ideals, particularly among lay people who are moved to revolt against an inefficient formalism among the Christian churches and their ministers. Hence the concern of such as Mr. Aldous Huxley for Buddhist mysticism, for union with God without the interference of the sort of medium that might seem to be implied by the person of Christ and his Church; Mr. Gerald Heard seeks new life in the familiar 'three ways' of the masters of the spiritual life. Or again, in an entirely different context, the movement of a spirit appears in the mystical fire of the modern nationalist inspired by the love of his country. Even in orthodox Catholic circles we find a tendency to a quakerish reliance on the Holy Spirit with little regard for outward

forms of religion; there is an enthusiasm for the doctrine of the Mystical Body, which, however, neglects the external structure of that Body. Anticlericalism provides a spur to these movements. To the layman the ecclesiastical practitioner may appear as a 'political priest,' but more often, at least in this country, as the dead weight of authority stifling all initiative by his insistence on conformity to outworn standards. Perhaps even the curious popularity of star-gazers, the lay prophets of the newspapers, is another symptom of the same weakness.

On the other hand, we should not be misled by the devoted activity and ceaseless labours of so many of the clergy, who are inspired by the most genuinely Christian impulses, into thinking that the danger of externalism in official religion is not in fact present. There is indeed an activism that is closely allied with the legalism of an externalised religion, in so far as the constant immersion in the business of social welfare and reconstruction becomes a substitute for the interior life of prayer and love of God. The difficulty is that the clergy of to-day have far too much to do. The falling away from Christianity of a whole civilisation has left them with such an infinite task that once they have set their hands to the plough and continue to look ahead they become absorbed in endless work. But it is the external life of religion that consumes them; there is little opportunity for contemplation or the higher reaches of the spiritual life. Sometimes it seems that much of this energy is wasted in an adherence to old forms and methods unsuited to the new crisis. Thus the parish which has been organised to preserve the life of an already Christian society now tends to absorb more priestly effort than do the people who compose it, because the new, fluid and largely non-Christian society is not suited to the old disposition of forces. In this way an institution, such as the parish, which is a legal person, takes the place of the people, the human persons, as the object of ecclesiastical activities. The question that ranks first is: How to keep the parish going with its Sunday Masses and sermons and Saturday afternoon confessions? That is one type of legalism. Then the priesthood itself tends sometimes to become an institution set up by a host of rubrics on things that are 'done' and 'not done.' The first question here is: How ought a priest to behave? rather than: How best can his divine powers be used for the salvation of men and women who are falling away from Christianity in their thousands?

We must not exaggerate this tendency which allows organisation to attract to itself the energies that it was originally meant to direct to the good of God's children. But the danger is evident and we

must be on our guard against this type of merely external religion. New methods are demanded to meet the almost universal lethargy of the people with regard to the Christian religion. Old institutions must be modified, not clamped on to the new situation like an unyielding coat of mail; new ones must be born to breath the spirit of God into man once more. The Scottish Presbyterians have offered an excellent example of this in their Iona Community, which gathers its strength in the communal life of the clergy on the island and in the rebuilding of the ruined abbey, but which sends forth these men into the industrial centres to spread the gospel where Christianity suffers its severest losses. 'Both the organisation of our parishes,' says *The Coracle*, the organ of the community, 'and our practices in worship magnificently served a previous age; but the world pattern in which they were set has got broken. Reverent experiment in new organisation and new approaches to worship are urgently called for.' And these experiments are tried not only on the island, where for example the parsons work with the craftsmen on the walls of the monastery ('Together on wall and in Abbey we seek to forge a new vocabulary of work and worship'), but also on the mainland, for 'ministers go out two by two to work, within the parish system, under the minister of the parish where they go.'

Yet the spirit that makes us free does not—indeed, for society, cannot—work without the external, visible structure of the Church. A spiritual revival that tries to short-circuit the sacraments and the hierarchy does but widen the disastrous separation. Union with God comes only through Christ and through his Church. Obedience to the authority of the pope, the bishops and priests is necessary to gather together the forces of the spirit and direct them towards the final end of man. The sacraments are the indispensable channels of grace. Hence the true conception of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, which includes the union of all faithful in grace as well as the structure of that Body in the One, Holy and Apostolic Church of Rome, should provide the ground for a return to a vital harmony between the external and internal elements of religion. It is only when that harmony is living in the Church that it can act as the transformer of society, working through every aspect of the life of the individual, even in his politics and economics. Only then can the Church exercise her rightful influence in politics without handing over her ministers to be political priests.¹ But the fact stands that

¹ For an excellent discussion of this particular topic readers are advised to turn to the recent *Penguin Special* by the then Archbishop of York, whose promotion to the See of Canterbury has greatly added to the importance of the book, *Christianity and Social Order*.

until new methods are found to meet the new emergency the legal person will continue to rank greater in importance than the human, the externals of religion will be divorced from its interior spirit, and victory or defeat in this hideous war will be equally incapable of affecting the ultimate collapse of the whole of the present civilisation.

' GREY EMINENCE ' ¹

*Where there is no vision, the people perish; . . . if those who are the salt of the earth lose their savour, there is nothing to keep that earth disinfected, nothing to prevent it from falling into complete decay. The mystics are channels through which a little knowledge of reality filters down into our human universe of ignorance and illusion. A totally unmystical world would be a world totally blind and insane. From the beginnings of the eighteenth century onwards, the sources of all mystical knowledge have been steadily diminishing in number, all over the planet. We are dangerously advanced into the darkness.*²

FOR several centuries now, Europe has been the battleground for an attack upon the very existence of the spirit of man, though it was during and after the eighteenth century that the attack reached its height; and it is man who has been more or less consistently the loser till almost the whole of his heritage has been taken from him. The stature of Christian man was infinite—we speak of Christian doctrine and belief not practice *quia omnes nos peccavimus*: we betray what we believe but that does not invalidate the beliefs—because seeking first the kingdom of heaven he could find oneness with God and be filled, and all the other things, the knowledge and love of created things and joy in them, and the whole of a happy human life, were added to him. He was a thing of majesty because he was God's child. But the New Order of the Renaissance did away with the grandeur and humbleness of Christian man (or, as Mr. Huxley styles him, 'theocentric man'); and substituted for them the abasement and pride of finite man, of man the measure of all things, of

¹ *Grey Eminence: A Study in Religion and Politics.* By Aldous Huxley. (Chatto and Windus; pp. 278; 15/-).

² *Op. cit.*, p. 82.