

THE BURNING QUESTION OF
ORIGINAL SIN

THAT there is something seriously wrong with the world and that this could and should be put right, are two commonplaces so commonly held as to verge on triteness. This universal consensus however is quickly turned into a discord of clamant and contradictory voices, when, preparatory to any attempt at curing the ill, an explanation is sought of the cause and origin of it.

On the one hand there is Jean Jacques Rousseau and all his spiritual descendants, who premising that man himself was originally perfect, happy and free, believe that man lost his happiness and his freedom when first he bowed to authority. In this line of thought we get philosophical anarchists, like Kuropatkin and Tolstoy, who go the whole way, maintaining that if only one did away with all government all ills would automatically disappear too and the Golden Age of humanity reappear. Some do not go as far as that, though agreeing that government must be reduced to a minimum if things are to right themselves: to which tribe belong Proudhon and the syndicalists who consider local government permissible but rule out anything approaching government on a national scale. There are also the doctrinaire liberals who, without becoming specific, hold generally that the less government there is the better. From this we shade off into rugged individualism and into the belief that, to make the world happy, all that is needed is to give it the vote.

Against this diagnosis of the cause of evil as political are pitted the utopians, who consider it to be economic. Starting with Babreuf, early Socialism saw in economic disparity the main source of all ills and therefore pleaded that, to restore the Rousseauesque Golden Age, all that was needed was the abolition of private property. But with Marx the ideal aimed at changed from Bucolics to Machine Industry and man's happiness was consequently conceived, not as consisting in the simple life of an idyllic pastoral, but in being a well-oiled cog in a wonderfully efficient machine. In the event communists have more and more soft-pedalled on the abolition of private property and increasingly stressed the need for rationalizing human society by means of a totalitarian regime.

Hence there has come to be substituted for the purely negative eighteenth century formula of simply removing an obstacle to the Golden Age—be that 'authority' or 'private property'—the positive formula of the twentieth century, which demands the construction

of a perfectly rationalized, and therefore flawless, human society. What, however, is common to both formulas is the premise that human perfection and happiness is the product of a perfectly and happily functioning society: that, therefore, all the ills plaguing man today are external to him and can and will be abolished with the progress of science and a consequent scientific reconstruction of human society.

With the first application of nuclear fission to the construction of an atomic bomb, this faith in science has of late received a nasty jolt in popular estimation. But even two centuries before Hiroshima it remained inexplicable why, if man was perfect, happy and free, he should ever have bowed to authority or claimed private property. Even if the explanation were true that 'authority' and 'private property' were the origin of all evil, the real problem would remain, why did man ever adopt either? Not a political or economic, but only a psychological explanation can really explain this. After Darwin and Marx this line of argument was of course dropped. The Golden Age lay now, not in the past, but in the future. Man started by being brutish and irrational, but gradually—blessed word!—dropped his brutishness and became rational. And the more rational and clever and scientific he became, the more he eradicated evil from the world, until eventually there will be none left and man will be perfectly happy.

Unfortunately for this evolutionist explanation, there is again this affair of the atomic bomb. Simultaneously with this supreme proof of man's technological mastery of matter comes the experience that never seems the world to have been so riddled with ills as today. Nobody today is quite so simple as to believe any more that greater technical skill necessarily makes for greater happiness or that intensification of knowledge in itself produces a perfect human society.

The cure of our ills by purely external methods therefore seems impossible; so impossible that even a non-Catholic might perhaps dare, without after all exposing himself to too much ridicule, to consider the alternative explanation put forward long, long ago, in the third chapter of Genesis. There, in very simple language, the profound truth is set forth that evil came to beset man, not by external human forces and circumstances, but by man himself making an interior evil choice and deciding that it was preferable to gratify one's senses than to obey God. But I am here not concerned about the relative merits of the Catholic dogma of original sin and of the pelagian, rousseauesque and marxist dogma of evil being purely environmental. We live in an age of amazing credulity and there will continue to be no lack of credulous persons who will

believe the wish-fancies of the externalists, whether political or economic. Those of us who prefer faith to credulity will still prefer the internalist account given in Genesis 3—which throws the responsibility upon every one of us—as rather uncomfortable to be sure but for all that inescapably true.

The point I would make is that as long as there are Communists and Liberals on the one hand, and Catholics on the other, it would facilitate our common future if on both sides it were realized that what divides us is not a political or economic theory. Catholics have always contended that the ever-changing political and economic environment of man should be such as to make it easy and not difficult for him to be virtuous, and therefore they should gladly discuss the pro and con of any proposed measures, political or economic, Liberal or Socialist, on their purely political or economic merits. The great mistake Catholics have made so often in the past was to oppose Communism and Liberalism not on that plane but as Catholics. This has naturally led Liberals to identify Catholics with Tory Reactionaries, and Communists to identify them with High Finance Capitalists. Where we differ fundamentally and where Catholics cannot but be intransigent is in the contradictory ideologies concerning evil. In this realm of eternal verities we, as Catholics, cannot compromise. *Non possumus*.

But when it comes to practical measures to be taken in a world of contingency nothing prevents us from approaching, *as citizens*, fellow citizens of our nation or of our world on the best means to be taken to cope with specific ills. We may still, on purely economic grounds, conclude that a certain measure implying collectivization is to be opposed, or that another one abandoning controls is, on purely political grounds, undesirable: but let us, for heaven's sake, discipline ourselves into saying and thinking that we reject these measures because they seem technically unsound, but not because they are anti-Catholic or 'Communist' or 'Radical'; and on the other hand, when we plead for U.N.O., let us not fall ourselves into the mistake of thinking that, if only we constructed a perfect international body, we could get rid of all international ills.

A little more emphasis on the doctrine of original sin would. I