

COMMENTARY

BELIEF AND PRACTICE. Over Easter and the few weeks that followed the churches, and more especially the force of their witness in the present time, on various occasions reached the news, leader, and correspondence columns of the daily press. It was, no doubt, with some vague, however curious, sense that the season was appropriate that the *News Chronicle* chose Holy Week in which to publish the results of the Gallup Poll it had commissioned into 'the religious beliefs and practices of the British people'.

The terms of reference of the poll were belief and practice; and in neither of these were the results in the end unexpected. The answers first printed, however, seemed to give grounds for concluding that Britain remained substantially orthodox Christian in belief. Thus 60-80 per cent held that there was a God, and, even more surprisingly, 60-70 per cent stated that Christ was the 'Son of God'. It was only later when we learned that of those who professed belief in God, roughly half were using the word in the sense of a 'life-force or spirit', not a personal God, that it became evident that while the number of non-churchgoing professed believers probably remains high, these are increasingly marked by a vague religiosity flavoured with muddled memories of Christianity (coupled with retention of that name), at the expense of continued adherence to the fundamental Christian doctrines about God and Christ.

Eighty-five per cent of the poll said that 'a Christian need not go to church'. The practice of religion, in the traditional sense of joining in public worship and bearing corporate witness to the Christian faith thereby, has lost all meaning for them. The *Manchester Guardian* summed up this attitude in the title 'Uncommitted' which it gave to the leader devoted to the *News Chronicle* findings. It also neatly summed up what this numerous group would probably understand by the practice of religion when it said: 'It is true, of course, that a man or woman can be a good Christian without attending services or being a member of a church. Loving one's neighbour . . . and the concept of public service are far from confined to practising Christians or to people who formally adhere to any religion.'

This equation of being a Christian with the individual per-

formance of good works was, of course, at one time frequently to be heard even from churchmen. The Letters to the Editor that followed the article in the *Guardian* would seem to reveal that the churches as a whole are happily recovering from that particular heresy. For many correspondents, while approving of the general tone of the leader, took exception to the passage just quoted, thus bearing witness to a new awareness that one can only be a Christian, and become one, in the context of the worshipping Church. And with this sense of the necessity of the Church there goes hand in hand a sense of the necessity of her unity, which also became 'news' recently with the publication of the joint-report of Anglican and Presbyterian theologians on relations between their churches, this appearing, with somewhat doubtful delicacy, on the eve of the 250th anniversary of the Union of the Parliaments.

A Catholic cannot but rejoice at the recovery of this sense of the Church and her unity among our separated brethren. He should not, of course, be misled thereby into day-dreaming about an imminent landslide of conversions; and on most of the manifestations of this sense he will have the greatest reserve. In the matter of the recent inter-church Report, for example, he will realize that the remarkable changes and compromises suggested could only lead, if accepted, to an external inter-communion inimical to true unity. For while practice is a necessity for belief, it is equally true that practice is ultimately vain unless accompanied by clear and firm belief concerning its central element, the Eucharist. Yet the indubitable fact of a welcome new climate of thought in the non-Catholic churches remains.

There remains too the indubitable fact of the vast majority of the uncommitted. On them no change within the churches can be hoped to have any immediate effect. Whether or not the celebrated time-lag whereby the attitudes of the majority today reflect in a remarkable way a now defunct intellectual fashion of contempt for the Church, may yet work in the opposite sense in favour of a restored integral Christianity is a nice speculative question. The practising Christian will perhaps be moved more by the recent reminder of the extent of post-Christianity in Britain to redouble his prayers this Whitsun to the Holy Ghost to whom alone belongs the effective building-up of Christ's Church, and so doing to commit himself even more to his part in that task and witness.