CHURCH AND STATE

By GEORGE BULL

THERE MUST BE at least as many volumes on the subject of Church and State as there are reputedly biographies of Napoleon. Most are stale and dated today and the subject demands fresh exploration. The content of the words, of course, changes from generation to generation. The confrontation between the nation state and the papacy of Pius IX or Pius XII was very different from that between the papacy of Hildebrand and the Empire of Henry IV; and the confrontation between the papacy of pope Paul's successor and the continental states of the future will be as different again. But running as a thread through history is the two-fold tension between the spiritual authority of the institutional Church and the political authority, and between the other-worldly religion of the christian and his political involvement.

One aspect of the subject that seems particularly striking to-day is that the individual christian is being urged to make his religion far more 'worldly', just at a time when the institutional Church has shed itself of all but the remnants of its claims to political power. The paradox claims more attention than it has been given.

Extraordinarily little was taught directly, or is recorded to have been taught, in the New Testament on the political duties of the faithful. Of the two texts that spring to mind, the first is Christ's enigmatic answer to a guileful question, sprung by *agents-provocateurs*. 'And he said to them: Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's'.[1] The second, from St Paul, is a blunt counsel of obedience (quoted, surprisingly, by a well known british industrialist during the recent politico-religious turmoil in Northern Ireland): 'Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but from God: and those that are, are ordained of God'.[2]

Both texts seem to dissociate religion from politics. Yet the very division introduced by christianity between the sacred and the profane, and so between religion and politics, set up a permanent tension between Church and State, believer and society, christian

[1] Lk. 20, 25. [2] Rom. 13, 1.

and government, that has vexed every generation, ever since; has never been resolved; and today has grown so complex that it may become increasingly tempting to return to the deceptively simple message of the New Testament texts, and to Christ's proclamation that his kingdom was not of this world.

The temptation is all the greater, if one considers the political history of the institutional Church. What kind of 'institution' did Christ intend the Church to be? We are still in the process of finding out, as witness the present agonized debate within the Church over the role of law and the proper functions and relationships of pope, bishops, priests and laity. But historically, the institutional Church, and notably the papacy, has modelled its organization and laws very closely during most of its existence on those of the secular state, even to adopting its pomps and punishments and at one stage (in the early 16th century at an admittedly exceptional juncture) coming near to fusing Church and State in an hereditary kingdom. At various times the papacy has assumed the appearance of a federal authority, of an autocracy, of a constitutional monarchy.

The mirror image of the State provided historically by the institutional Church may even explain or illuminate the present painful evolution, as lay catholics seek to reconcile their dignified role in democratic society with their low-posture ecclesiastical status. But what else would one expect if Christ 'founded' a visible society than that it should develop like or in reaction to existing institutions? Now a pope receives homage from an emperor; now he legislates the division of the world; now he raises revenue to defend the papal States; now he excommunicates any of the faithful supporting those who have robbed him of them. The point being made is a scandalous one: that the Church has been enmeshed in external as well as internal politics, and no member of the Church can ignore this political heritage. The knowledgeable catholic can explain and excuse even its grosser historical manifestations, although he would do well to remember how true to non-catholic ears can still ring the story told by Dostoyevsky only ninety years ago of what the Grand Inquisitor said to Christ.

So in the western democracies at least it is a relief for our generation to relegate to the historical archives the subject of conflicting political claims between Church and State, with the reflection that in the past when the spiritual society of the Church has encroached on the secular sphere the results have been invariably unedifying

and sometimes near disastrous. Loyal to the papacy with no pretensions to temporal power and bonded together by charity rather than by laws, we can live in a new diaspora like the early christians, who under the Empire prayed for their pagan rulers, did their military service, paid their taxes dutifully, and overcame persecution by non-violence.

The disengagement of the Church from politics has two main aspects. The less important is the final demise after a long struggle of the claims of the papacy to temporal power. The more important is the acceptance by the Church of a 'non-political' role within tolerant, pluralistic societies, which is still incomplete but whose reality will readily be appreciated by anyone who has followed the evolution of its attitude towards religious freedom during the past century up to the debates of the second Vatican Council. These developments may be welcomed simply on the grounds that although the spiritual history of the Church is a glorious one, how many more pages of its political history would one wish to see written on the lines of those of the past?

Nonetheless the weakening of the claims of the institutional Church to political power presents the individual catholic with a greater challenge. The institutional Church can cast aside the weapons and discard the language of power politics. But catholics cannot ignore the one half of the enigmatic gospel message that says render to God the things that are God's. Conflict between the christian conscience and the power politics of the secular world is inescapable. Just as the teachings of Christ on love and brotherhood were subversive of a political and social order based on slavery, so those same teachings today are, as an instance, subversive of a world social and political order shot through with anomalies and injustices.

The early christians were dutiful to the Emperor, but were executed all the same when they refused to sacrifice to false gods. The equivalent today to offering such sacrifice is acquiescence in a balance of economic and political forces ensuring that millions of people in the world enjoy a no doubt blameless affluence, whereas millions more live in conditions intolerable to human dignity. For although the spirit of christianity has shrunk in revulsion from the use of political coercion by the Church, it has also by a remarkable theological metamorphosis swung away from an unbalanced concentration on personal salvation to concern with the christianization of society. And this demands an intense application of energy

to the present social and political condition of man in the world.

It is bad history, of course, to contrast too starkly the traditional christian emphasis on 'holiness' as implying a withdrawal from the world with the present stress on holiness as an expression of concern for the community, and hence as necessitating social and political involvement. Like so many current debates, arguments about the relative merits of the contemplative and the active life are hardly new. Moreover – as a better acquaintance with the lives of the saints might remind controversialists today – an intense but sane concern with personal sanctification can provide the fuel for ardent humanism of the most practical and active kind. The more useful distinction is between the idealism of the Gospel and the exigencies of the actual political world.

Two christians – a highly intelligent political leader dedicated to the service of his country, and a zealous anglican bishop dedicated to the service of the under-privileged – recently met in debate on british television. The argument was about racial attitudes, but it had a far more general application. The politician reasoned that the words of Christ were relevant to the search for personal salvation but not to the daily work of politics. He was following an old tradition, stretching back beyond lutheran protestantism to Machiavelli and the mediaeval world. The bishop repudiated this doctrine of the two kingdoms to argue that the Church's salvation mission inevitably thrust it into the political arena, and he affirmed (in the words of Paul Oestreicher) that the 'warfare of the spirit' is 'severely practical and is concerned with the creation of justice and peace here and now, with setting free the oppressed, with proclaiming in action the possibility of a new humanity'.[1]

These two strands of thought have always run through christianity; and powerful theological let alone practical arguments can be deployed against the latter, but in the mainstream of Catholic thinking it has always, surely, been dominant. If politics is about voting procedures, or the balance of public as against private ownership, or about the correct methods by which to remedy a balance of payments deficit, then naturally, provided the politician aims at the general good, the measures adopted are a matter of indifference to the christian as a christian. But if politics are about matters affecting the dignity of man, then the christian as a christian must be intensely political, and within his limitations intensely

[1] *The Times* (London, Oct 18, 1969).

active. It is simply a question of definition and context.

The context of serious politics today is the struggle of the whole of mankind to achieve material conditions of life adequate for social and spiritual development. And it is a remarkable and heart-warming phenomenon of our age that however disappointing the response of the rich (and chiefly 'christian') countries may be, there has been a great stirring of conscience, especially among the young, on the subject of world poverty in the midst of plenty. One path through which ordinary christians can, like Christ, embrace and change the world is seen by millions of them as being through contributing to the material development of other nations and other peoples.

In this sphere, although much of the relevance and validity of the Church's traditional social and economic teaching has been overtaken by the swiftness of technical and social change, the institutional Church has in recent years given a remarkable lead, through the encyclicals of pope John and pope Paul, and through the work of the second Vatican Council, leading to the establishment of a world network of commissions for justice and peace. In this way, the institutional Church is deeply involved in international politics, and although it no longer possesses the political power it has had in the past, it commands the vital weapon of example.

The example of the Church, agreed, is not all that it should be. The ordinary christian today is often baffled by his inability to help change the world through his personal self-sacrifices and effort, and the Church could mobilize his efforts far more powerfully than it does. And besides rightly trying to persuade governments and individuals to be more generous with their wealth, it could be more overtly generous with its own. It is not a question of sometimes quixotic gestures, such as selling for the poor of less developed countries statues of gold or crowns of jewels (arresting and right and even practical as such demonstrations of concern may be) but of looking far more intelligently at its material and human resources and injecting these efficiently into the economic system of the world. How much coordinated planning is there, even within national hierarchies of, for example, the financial resources of the Church? And despite the great generosity of Church giving, how much potential is wasted because the challenge of world poverty is neglected or forgotten?

At the recent ecumenical Swanwick Conference in Great Britain, concerned with the problem of world development, it was proposed

that all the british churches should by the end of 1972 devote five per cent of their investments to an independent fund for the creation of wealth in developing countries. The proposal was also pursued of setting up investment or unit trusts, in which the recipients as well as donors of aid could participate. These are practical ideas in the realm of finance, too little explored as yet, which the Catholic Church could legitimately adopt, not least since its financial operations are substantial even if (partly through lack of information) they are often exaggerated.

This may seem an insignificant contribution to the immense problems of world poverty and there will still be catholics, even at this time of day, who will argue that these are political matters (terms of trade, tariffs, investment flows and attitudes, rates of interest, expenditure on arms) with which the Church should not meddle. But can there really be any fundamental disagreement among catholics if they are mindful of the words of pope Paul:

> . . . zeal for poverty is no obstacle to the proper understanding and rightful application of the important laws of economics . . . We consider that the inner freedom which results from zeal for evangelical poverty makes us far more sensitive to the human aspects of economic questions, and better fitted to understand them. We can pass, where necessary, a calm and often severe judgment on wealth and on the luxuries of life. We can come promptly and generously to the aid of those in need, and do our utmost to ensure that wealth, far from being a source of conflict, selfishness and pride amongst men, shall be used justly and equitably for the good of all, and distributed with greater foresight.[1]

Or of the words of Christ:

> I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; in prison and you came to me . . . I tell you solemnly in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.[2]

This is politics. Christ is the sick child in India, the oppressed peasant in latin America, the hungry family in an african village.

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[1] *Ecclesiam Suam.* [2] Mt 25, 32.

But to extend charity or, better, justice, to Christ necessitates, in our shrunken but complex modern world, adopting political ways and means: negotiations with governments and international organizations, forming pressure groups, moulding public opinion, acting directly with the Church's own resources. If this is so, we come full circle to the realization that the institutional Church as well as the individual christian always has been and always will be involved in politics. The Church went into politics from the start of its existence. It sometimes employed weapons, often from the best of motives, that were alien to its nature, and often pursued the wrong ends (serving itself rather than the world) as well as using the wrong means of political action.

No one is suggesting that the Church should use such weapons again, but it must run the risk of making mistakes. And it must run the risk of being accused of mistaken political interference (when it raises its voice against racial intolerance or the misuse of wealth, and organizes its members in support of its teaching), like its Founder, who was executed for political reasons.