

The Bishop of Woolwich squares the circle

A great deal of attention has recently been focused on controversies within the Church of England by the publication of a book written by the Bishop of Woolwich entitled *Honest to God*. The book has prompted wide interest in issues basic to religion within the Church itself, propositions involving the modification of assumptions fundamental to the religious outlook have been argued about for some time.

These arguments, forced upon the Church by social developments external to it, have been reluctant but inevitable, bitter and agonised. There is no doubt, however, that the publication of this book has brought these arguments under wider public scrutiny, has stepped up the intensity of the discussion, and has brought about a new phase in what is quite frankly a time of crisis for the Church of England. Its problem is how to reverse mounting indifference to it and its dogma. This may be a problem for the Church itself, which quite obviously will resent and strive against becoming a social anachronism, but in relation to the crucial social problems facing man today it is irrelevant and superfluous. The significance of the controversy is that it opens a fresh chapter in man's long struggle to free his existence from service to outside agencies—the gods.

Of all the churches in this country, it is the Church of England that has suffered most of the erosion of what was once a compelling enthusiasm for religious activities, especially in urban areas. At least until the turn of the century, the Church of England remained a powerful force that intervened actively in the everyday affairs of the community. Quite apart from providing spiritual balm to a 19th century working class depressed by acute poverty, it was the authoritative keeper of the community's moral conscience. It was the father confessor to an era in trouble, as well as a positive force in political and economic affairs. The pulpit was a platform, and congregations were large enough to make them worth talking to.

But since those days, the thunderous voice of the Church of England has softened to a whisper, largely ignored and unnoticed. The declamations from its pulpits re-echo around virtually empty caverns; its morality is flaunted; the soporifics that it once dispensed are now found elsewhere in more acceptable forms. But it is not a situation that has been created by mass active opposition, coherently articulated or positively demonstrated. The majority of the population are not even atheists, let alone aware and convinced of Marxist theories, but the attitude of a growing number of people is of massive indifference and crushing unconcern. The consequences for the Church are just the same. Although there is still a degree of social esteem accorded to baptisms, marriages and burials presided over by the Church, they have more significance as desirable conventions than as conscientious acts of faith; as customs they have become drained of their religious and spiritual meaning.

The steady withdrawal of active support for Church affairs does not apply in equal degree to every branch of religion in this country. Quite certainly, the Roman Catholic Church retains a firmer grip over its members than the Church of England. But there are good historical reasons for this, and whilst the Catholic Church makes it much more difficult for individuals to drift away, and although it still remains a powerful

bastion of superstition based on fear and ignorance, it is unlikely either that in the long term it can resist tendencies fundamental to modern capitalism--scepticism and individual self-interest.

The dogma of the Church of England boils down to an expedient. It summed up the aspirations of a 16th-17th century trading class seeking freedom for the development of its own activities outside the influence of the established landed interests whose political and economic power was based, at least in part, on the Roman Catholic Church, and which expressed themselves in its ideology.

The Roman Catholic Church secured subservience by the weapon of tyrannical superstition. Thus its god was a tyrant and a taskmaster; a god who imposed a duty of constant adulation and who threatened wrongdoers with the nightmare penalty of eternal damnation. Beyond this, since the Church itself was the physical embodiment of God on earth, the worship of God had to be the worship of the only gateway to heaven and its followers were forced to submit to its authority on all aspects of moral and political behaviour. A hierarchy of sin, the bleeding heart of Jesus, the pain of eternally stoked hellfire and other frightening fundamentalist accoutrements of primeval religious fervour. And by means of its power over ignorant and bewildered men, it secured their economic subservience.

Protestantism then was the expedient ideological innovation of a dynamic social element which still felt the need for religious justification but which sought freedom from the authoritarian structures of the Roman Church. Thus with the Reformation and the establishment of the Church of England, a god was invoked who dispensed with the Church as a necessary turnstile between himself and his flock. A dogma was created that allowed entrance to heaven merely on condition of belief in the holy trinity. The expedient changing of cherished beliefs is in the long-standing tradition of the Church of England, and it is not surprising that Catholicism retains a more enduring grip over its members.

As a true child of his age, and in emulation of the image-mongering techniques of advertising, the Bishop of Woolwich believes that in order combat the growing lack of interest in the Church and Christianity, it is necessary to change the image of its god. He holds that it is no longer acceptable to think of god as some supernatural, yet objectified, reality existing "out there", somewhere in outer space, holding omnipotent sway over a universe of his own creation. He holds that God should no longer be thought of as an entity external to society's own existence, to whom individuals owe personal worship. For the Bishop of Woolwich, the idea of God represents all the best aspirations of man towards brotherhood, mutual tolerance and dedication to community interests. God to him is a force for common good inherited by contemporary man from the most obscure beginnings of history. Different from beer-swilling vicars singing Nelly Dean with contrived yet conscientious enthusiasm, the absurd indignity of ton-up parsons, hymns sung to skiffle and other props, the ideas of the Bishop of Woolwich form the more credible substance of today's radical theology. The Bishop has realised that social consciousness has developed past the point of an easy acceptance of the supernatural imagery of traditional religion that sprang from social conditions in which science was in its infancy and man's technical apparatus crude. The evolving scientific culture of the space age displaces the superstitious faith

of religion and reduces it to an irrelevance. It could once be truly observed and easily demonstrated that the Church was a fundamental support of capitalist society; but the order of priorities between religious faith and scientific method in a society driven towards greater technical complexity has changed all this.

Because capitalism is essentially a competitive form of society, and because this competition takes the form of struggle for commercial success both within nations and between nations, society is impelled to seek greater efficiency and productivity of labour. Thus technical change and scientific research and all the social consequences of them, including a bias towards technical education, are basic features of modern capitalist society. The fact of continued technical innovation so deeply permeates our culture that even momentous achievements are accepted with equanimity. Man lives today in an atmosphere of intense scientific enquiry which results in new discoveries daily. The means of communication are developed to a point where this new knowledge, whether it is about stars a million light years away, or the breeding habits of some obscure species of tropical fish, can be communicated immediately to all men. It is an age that emphasises the contrast between knowledge that can be proved and assumptions that require faith.

The first premise of historical materialism is that all man's thinking is social thinking; that there is no idea that man discusses, no interest that he fights for, and no ideal that he aspires to, that is not derived from social origins. When the Bishop of Woolwich denies God a supernatural existence outside human society and uses the concept to mean a social force between them, then whether he is aware of it or not, and whether he likes it or not, he has taken a faltering but definite step into the materialist camp. In face of a developing scientific culture, the nature of religious belief undergoes gradual but definite qualitative change. Appropriately, it is during National Productivity Year that the Bishop of Woolwich articulates his death wish.

Even in the early 19th century, the economic structure of society was justified as being God-given, and to advocate its change was a sinful and heretical challenge to almighty predetermination. The relationship between man and God was close and personal. Earthly existence was merely a brief testing time for one's fitness to live eternally in heaven. It was a life in the service of God rather than a life of service to self. Today, even for those who are not religious, God is not thought of with the same awesome fear and only a few believe seriously that if life on earth is unsatisfactory, there remains the second chance in heaven. In the space age, the control of man's destiny is gravitating from outer space to earth itself.

Where the working class accepts allegiance to religion, to royalty or the state, or accepts a false ideology or economic subservience to the capitalist class, it denies itself the realisation of its own interests. The poverty of the modern proletariat still results from the fact that its labour operates in commodity form, is bought for wages and exploited by capitalists with a view to profit. To buy a man's labour power and set him to work is to reduce his existence to a commercial transaction and alienate his individuality.

In offering religion in more credible form to an age that is increasingly sceptical, the Bishop of Woolwich seeks to strip it of its supernatural paraphernalia and present it as an indispensable system of morals. But from the time that the Church cornered men's

superstitious fear and exploited it with declamations of nature as the created province of the almighty, it has evolved to a position where it is no longer even confident in its dogma and is reduced to weak exhortations to live in good neighbourliness and brotherly love. And even these appeals are nothing more than hypocrisy since at the same time that it spuriouly wishes social harmony it condones and supports a competitive economic system whose fundamental feature is the exploitation of men by men.

The evolving technical nature of capitalist society will go on revealing the Church as more and more of an outlandish anachronism and in time will heap greater and greater embarrassment upon its dogma. Yet in spite of this and of the attempts by churchmen to modify the image of the Church and alter its social role, it will retain one enduring characteristic, that of an anti-working class institution. The Church supports the present method of producing and distributing wealth--capitalism. The ideas that it disseminates, its concepts about society, and the universe it trades in, are either irrelevant or hostile to the ideas that the working class requires to achieve its economic emancipation.

Socialists seek the universal brotherhood of men, but for the Church to sloganise ideals and in practice support a system that precludes their realisation, is worse than hollow gesture, it erects a barrier to their practical achievement. What an organisation that genuinely aspires to social harmony on a world scale should do is relate to specific social situations within actual experience, and discern and illuminate and explain the reasons why men now behave in a manner contrary to their mutual interests. It should argue a valid social theory and advocate a practical course for political action that offer the sure prospect of the unity of all men based on relations of genuine social equality. Only Socialists do this.

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