

FRENCH CHRISTIANITY¹

THE more I get on in years, the more certain I am that a Christian is nothing without Christ, even from a purely human point of view; that the unimaginable gift, which we have received without having in any way deserved, has this terrible counterpart that in betraying it we fall lower than the most inferior men, becoming monsters in the etymological sense of the word. If Christians felt this fearful truth profoundly they would no longer be tempted to despise the sceptics and to divide mankind into two parts, the Good and the Bad, placing themselves, of course, among the former. They would understand that the amazing privilege which has been bestowed upon them forbids them setting themselves up too easily as judges of those to whom it has been denied. They would especially refrain from having those disinherited brothers butchered by machine-guns, on the excuse of honouring Good, and of suffering with Christ on the Cross.

The great unhappiness of this world, the great tragedy of this world is not that there are atheists, but that we are such indifferent Christians; for I am more and more convinced that it is we who are sending the world to perdition, that it is we who are attracting to it the lightning of the Wrath of God. What a folly to pretend to justify ourselves by proudly boasting that we alone are in possession of the truth, of the whole and living truth, of the kind which can liberate and save, while it remains impotent in our hands, or while we remain pitifully on the defensive behind a sort of Maginot line spiked high with prohibitions and inhibitions, as if we had nothing better to do than to guard the Law, whereas our natural and spiritual vocation is to fulfil it.

M. Mussolini once wrote that what he respected in the Church was that she is 'History's greatest conservative force.' It is, in fact, the very image which Caesar has always made for himself of the Church of God, and we know that that image is false. Unfortunately we know also that many Christians take it to be true, and that they would readily believe that Christ died solely for the safety of land-owners, for the prestige of all high officials, and for the stability of governments. I have never been what is so strangely called 'a Christian of the left,' and I deplore the frequent use of

¹ Translated from an article in 'Le Glaive de l'Esprit,' August, 1941, to the editors of which we offer our gratitude.

the phrase 'the revolutionary spirit of the Gospel,' because the expression is, to say the least, equivocal. I am certainly no anarchist, but I would ask whoever pretends to speak to me in the name of Order, first to produce his credentials. My obedience will not be given to all who ask it, it is not for all and sundry. I belong to the most ancient, to the most illustrious Christian country in Europe, one which has never received its masters from chance, but direct from the hands of God, in whose name the Successor of St. Rémi of Rheims anointed and crowned them with the consecrating oil. I have no taste for destruction, but neither was I born to preserve all that was offered me for preservation; I do not believe myself compelled to hatch every egg—even a serpent's egg! We Frenchmen have this vocation, not to preserve, but to serve.

Christians, I say to you that the present state of the world is the Christians' shame. You say that the world has failed you, it is you who are failing the world. Instead of crying in tremulo tones for the sympathy of tender-hearted people, that the forces of Evil are winning everywhere, that Paganism is rising again, you would better admit humbly that your Maginot line did not hold, that you have let the front of Christendom be broken. May it one day be reformed, with the help of the heroes and the saints of my race, in my humiliated country!

For Christian France is not dead; in Christian France probably more than anywhere else there are true Christians of Christendom. What matter that the great betrayal has scattered them! They know what they want, they want the Kingdom of God. They will not be satisfied to wait for it, they want it and they will go and seek it. They do not want it only for themselves, they will go and seek it for others; they do not believe that a Christian is bound to work out his own salvation alone, in secret, as the misers count their pennies.

Our tradition goes back much farther than the sixteenth century. We are the sons of cathedrals—not merely of the opulent churches of the Renaissance, so gilded, so comfortable; not of the luxurious salons of prayer so suitable for the meticulous examinations of conscience which are directed by professors of psychology, with exercises so complicated that one's whole life is spent in tempering and re-tempering a will which one risks never having the time to use for the good of one's neighbour. We are not made for these *travaux en chambre*.

Our cathedrals are so lofty and so open that we have learnt not to fear the draughts. We take Christianity as we take life—the two are only one—we take it as a risk. We have never wished to be

treated as infants, we are free children of God who have the right to eat at our Father's table, even if sometimes we happen to break the glasses. We do not first see Christianity as a complicated system full of inhibitions and restrictions. We know full well that the surest way of avoiding evil thoughts is to have good ones, and that self-detachment, so difficult to produce by mental gymnastics, comes easily to him who gives himself to others. We know also that the spirit of poverty will not be lacking in those who love the poor; loving them for themselves, and not for the spiritual profit that may be derived from charity, for surely God invites us to honour and serve them, and not to honour and serve ourselves by making use of them. French Christianity knows these secrets—these humble secrets, the possession of which cannot rouse the envy of the Sages and the Doctors—they are tools of somewhat rustic shape, but we know how to use them, they are fashioned to our own hands. They are ours as our language is ours, and, if I may say so, like the wine from our ancient vines.

GEORGES BERNANOS.

THE NEW WINE

Bitter is the fate of the grape. In golden weather
the million clusters of the vine are borne away
and in the groaning press the gatherers lay
the purple grape and the yellow to die together.
Hard, long is the treading; after, in deep earth,
the grapes ferment, lie still. Each season makes
its subtle stage in the wine, till that day breaks
when the long-nurtured vintage comes to birth.
God is your vintner, France. He is treading alone
the vat of His wrath and purple is His hem.
He will tread you to the end. Some day unknown,
when the deep cask after long ferment clears,
the world, thirsty for France, will not condemn
the blood-besprinkled vintage of these years.

P.U.F.