CORRESPONDENCE

I read Kevin Morris's articles on Fascism and British Catholic Writers 1924–1939 (*New Blackfriars*, January/February 1999) with enormous interest. He asks how Catholic writers and intellectuals 'could have expressed varying measures of attraction to what we *now* (italics mine) know to be the politics of megalomania, elitism, frustration, prejudice, deceit and brutality. How could cultured Catholics be even partially attracted to Fascism?'

He presents his evidence well, with quotations starting from Chesterton and Belloc and progressing through Dawson, Lunn, Woodruff, de la Bedoyère, Jerrold, Roy Campbell, Evelyn Waugh and Bernard Wall. I, too, am of that generation and would like to comment on some errors and omissions on the part of your author who is, presumably, looking back from a distance on those turbulent years. I shall speak for the defence, in face of his massive prosecution.

I would start by saying that he does not use the word 'fascist' with sufficient precision. He rightly differentiates between someone who is 'pro-fascist' and someone who is 'fascist', the former denoting support for a particular form of government, the latter describing an aggressive and racist mentality. But he wrongly attaches the 'pro-fascist' label to those who supported not only Mussolini's Italy but also Franco's Spain and Hitler's Germany. This is confusing.

If people were 'pro-fascist' in England in the twenties and thirties it meant that they saw hope in Mussolini's Italy which emerged out of widespread disillusionment with the ineffectual government, uninspired leadership and chaotic economic conditions which beset Italy after World War One and caused the King to invite Mussolini to form a government. The term 'pro-fascist' was *not* used for those in favour of the nationalist uprising in Spain in 1956. They were called 'pro-Franco'. Nor was it used for people who thought there was something to be said for Hitler. They were called 'pro-Nazi'.

Next point. Italian fascism did *not* seem at first to embody those abstract nouns listed by Kevin Morris in my first paragraph—and this he concedes by his insertion of the word 'now.' Admittedly there were killings in Italy and the abolition of opposition parties (such as Don Sturzo's Partito Popolare) but these were swallowed by lovers of Italy who wanted to see Mussolini's corporate state work—just as vastly more killings and hideously worse oppression in the Soviet Union were swallowed by kindly British liberals and socialists like the Webbs and

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Bernard Shaw who wanted to see Communism work. We have all 'turned a blind eye', either in our public or private lives or both, in the interests of what we see as a greater good.

The Abyssinian war in 1935 was a blow for pro-fascists but was excused on the grounds that France and Britain had already built up their empires while Italy was still a conglomerate of separate states. For those two countries to impose sanctions against a united Italy for wanting to increase its toe-hold in the Africa they had already colonised (and they would have nabbed Abyssinia if it had been worth it, so people said) seemed to pro-fascists hypocritical in the extreme. It also seemed politically inept, as their action would drive Italy into the arms of Germany, as indeed it did: the Rome/Berlin axis was formed in December 1936 (I was in Rome at the time and the headlines announcing this fact in the press vied with those announcing the abdication of Edward VIII). The Rome/Berlin axis was a bitter blow to pro-fascists, but even then there was the hope that Mussolini would let Hitler down and not support him in his pending war. The final divorce between Italy and pro-fascists came when Italy entered the war beside Germany in June 1940. Many of Mussolini's henchmen, including Ciano, were against Italy's entry into the war.

Kevin Morris tentatively suggests that one of the reasons why Catholic intellectuals were pro-fascist was because the hierarchy tended that way—after all, Mussolini was pro-family, pro-stability, had signed a concordat with the Pope safeguarding Catholic schools and so on. But in this Mr Morris is very wide of the mark. Most Catholic intellectuals paid scant attention to the utterances of the hierarchy.

For the sake of those of this generation who find it unbelievable that any intellectual, Catholic or otherwise, could ever have been pro-fascist, I shall depart from Kevin Morris's article about British pro-fascists for a moment and quote from a review by Clive Wilmer in the *TLS* (5/2/99). He is reviewing the letters of Ezra Pound to Olivia Rossetti Agresti, niece of Dante Gabriel and Christina. What he says illustrates the idealism that early Fascism was capable of engendering: 'Like Agresti, Pound had found his way into fascism by way of a utopian tradition, that of the Guild Socialists, who took their bearings from Ruskin and William Morris. His sympathies, also like Agresti's, ranged widely across the world, and he cherished many of the best Enlightenment values. His equation of Mussolini with Jefferson may be evidence of delusion, but it also indicates a residual preoccupation with the origins of liberal democracy ....'

Now to come to Spain. In the matter of Catholic intellectuals being pro-Franco, this is easily understandable as the government which

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Franco dislodged was openly anti-Catholic and priests and nuns had been murdered. Roy Campbell, living in Toledo at the time, told of opening his front door one morning and the bodies of two dead Carmelites, propped up against it, falling inwards onto his doormat (a story he enjoyed telling, let it be said). The alignments were interesting. British leftist intellectuals, such as MacNeice, Spender, Auden and Day-Lewis (the Macspaunday of Campbell's poem, *Flowering Rifle*) were, of course, ardently pro-Republican, but later, in the Cold War, were intransigently anti-Communist, and would have been appalled at the thought of Spain being a Russian outpost. Indeed in the Cold War years Stephen Spender founded the magazine *Encounter*, with American backing and an American co-editor, showing how radically his spots had changed.

There were two oases of neutrality among Catholics in the ferment of the Spanish Civil War—Maritain and the Dominicans. And, as Kevin Morris points out, there were two Catholic intellectuals who were outright pacifists—Eric Gill and E.I. Watkin, to whose names we should add Donald Attwater. They were against all wars, whether supposedly 'just' or 'unjust'. They devoted their time, in 1936, to founding the Catholic peace society, PAX.

For myself, the Spanish War stands out as illustrating to perfection Our Lord's description of 'a man [being] against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law' as families were riven apart by conflicting partisanships—not only in Spain itself but even in far-away England. Ironically, in England, the end of the war slipped by hardly noticed, overshadowed as it was by the onset of World War Two.

Which brings us to Germany. I cannot comment on the pro-Nazi mentality, as I knew no pro-Nazis. If anyone would like to read a book which gives an excellent picture of the various Catholic attitudes in the thirties, whether pro-fascist, pro-Franco, pro-Nazi or otherwise, they should read Bernard Bergonzi's novel, *The Roman Persuasion* Weidenfeld, 1981).

Barbara Wall
Hayricks,
Rackham,
Pulborough,
West Sussex RH20 2EU

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