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TOLERANCE AND TRUTH

OF LATE YEARS there has been a steady challenging voice directed against the Church, especially in England, accusing her of inconsistency. The challenge has been put most insiduously in the form of a question. How is it, the enquiry runs, that the Church can demand freedom for her schools, liberty to teach and preach her doctrines up and down the country, whereas if she was at this time the recognised religion of the land she would be the first to condemn all other religious schools and clap all other religious propagandists into prison? Perhaps the inconsistency seems more striking in more political terms; here are the Catholics of this country supporting Franco Spain and asking for just those liberties which Franco denies all his non-Catholic subjects. This attitude seems to some people as paradoxical and deceitful as a good deal of similar claims and activities among Communists. These latter will take advantage of any 'undemocratic' institution in a country if they can bend it to their own purposes, and so they reach power and immediately perform an unblushing *volte face* in condemning what they had used. So perhaps it would be in the case of Catholics should they ever get to power.

Paradoxical this position of the Church in a minority assuredly is, but not inconsistent. The paradox is based on the first principle of

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the inviolability and therefore intolerance of truth. Speaking absolutely there can be no compromise with truth. A half truth is a dangerous error; an admission of a false premise for the sake of immediate 'good relations' jeopardises the whole of man's attitude to reality. A small error can gradually undermine a complete civilisation, as seems to be the case with the Cartesian bloomer. It would be interesting to discover how many solipsistic suicides have been put to the account of Descartes's mistake; and certainly a great part of our topsy-turvydom has derived from that one falsity. It is the same in the life of the individual. Consequently, where there is a divine society commissioned by God to be the custodian of the truth, at least of the truth as related to life in faith and morals, there can be no tolerance of evil. Since the Fall, man, although blessed with an intelligence of its nature fitted for truth, calling out all the time for the truth and nothing but the truth, has been inclined to err and to err thinking he is correct. It requires now divine intervention and safeguard to prevent his calling black white and white black. So the Church, given the opportunity to exercise her natural supremacy in the direction of men's lives, will be as stringent as the severest master in stamping out error and preventing its contagious presence among men who are made for truth. The Church is the mystical body of the Word of God, and there is only one Word.

The Church, then, cannot leave stupid ignorant mankind to choose its own truth in the way that the Protestant attitude to the Sacrament of Confirmation indicates for the young Christian. The custodian of Truth cannot allow the weak-minded man to listen to persuasive words of heresy, or to agree to the dissemination of books which spread error undermining the salvation of men's souls. The freedom of the will does not mean in itself liberty to sin; the freedom of the press does not embrace every possible concoction of sentences and paragraphs; the idea of freedom of speech and education does not imply that a man may say just exactly what he likes to others. Any civilised nation recognises the principle behind this in its laws of libel and such-like restraints on tongue and press. But when the Catholic goes further and applies the principle to faith and morals and speaks of the inquisition, he is hounded down as a 'fascist'. Nevertheless, it is true that were the Church in the position she held in the ages of faith she would be bound to act as she did then in restraining attacks on the truth; she would now have to some extent to control education, broadcasting, speech and press. She would forfeit her position as the rock of Peter and custodian of the unique revelation of God in Christ Jesus if she allowed without protest the dissemination of doctrines contrary to her teaching.

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Naturally the Church, even when she has the complete allegiance of any nation, does not call in the secular arm at the slightest provocation or deal like some domineering bully in regard to every other religion. With the admission of the devastating harm of error must be joined the recognition of freedom of conscience. And there are many examples of old and at the present day where a Catholic country shows no harshness to Protestant or other minorities. Or again we find St Thomas insisting upon the rights of parents to bring up their children in their own religion, so that no one may forcibly baptise a pagan or Jewish child, except when the child is actually dying. And yet a Catholic parent who finds his child being drawn away from the true life of faith by bad companions or teachers is bound to deal severely with all concerned in order to keep his offspring from error. The Church dealing severely with her children, and showing the intolerance of the one truth of the Word, is in fact showing herself to be a champion of freedom, freedom from the enslavement of error.

Catholics should show no embarrassment in stating these claims of truth. And yet many writers on this topic in the press, when the controversy was raging, did seem unwilling to admit the charge of intolerance. In consequence they blundered over the accusation of inconsistency. For the reason why the Church, in a country like England, demands toleration for her schools and her system of education, is not that she claims to be tolerant herself about such vital matters, but rather that, as it is one of the proud claims of the country that she allows liberty, to the extent of libertinism, in speech and press, she should not make exception in the case of the Church. The same insistence on being treated on an equal footing with Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses would not be found in the Church in Russia, for instance, where the idea of 'democracy' gives no hint of toleration. Where the state claims the same custody of absolute truth, the state is equally intolerant, and the conflict with the Church is naturally 'to the death'. The totalitarian state of Communist or Fascist structure dethrones the First Truth and sets up its own substitute, and therefore the same intolerance which is the just property of Truth becomes the unjust claim of substitute-truth. It would be inconsistent, then, for the Church to demand toleration in such a state; she must demand something far more fundamental, a complete abandonment of the perverted principles of the state. That is why the conflict with these totalitarianisms is so bitter and without quarter.

But where no such principle exists, and where no one in theory professes to know the truth for certain, there the Catholic Church

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should be tolerated with other religions, and more than that, its own principles of apparent 'exclusiveness' should be respected. That is the Church's claim in this country. Perhaps the English idea of liberty has lost its grip and become a *laissez-faire*. Certainly the reactionary movement of totalitarianism is gaining momentum everywhere, pushed on by the crisis and supported by Socialism. But as long as it is the professed policy of the British nation, then the Church has every right to demand respect for its liberties. And that is surely the force of the Church's claim.

If, however, those who administer the education of the country publicly proclaimed that the Roman Church was a danger, not to civilian life and the rights of the State—for that would be palpably false—but to the other religions of the country, they would have some justification, not as statesmen but as men of religion, for protesting against the existence of the Church in the realm. The Church necessarily is a threat to all other religions; she publicly proclaims herself to be *Catholic* and to be custodian of the unique divine revelation. And for that reason she does always expect to be persecuted and is blessed to suffer persecution. But that is not the ground of attempts to curtail her liberties in this country. The Church challenges the state to deal fairly with her, she does not address these appeals to the Church of England or to the Methodist Union. And statesmen would have to identify the state with a definite religion and impose the same totalitarianism as Communist or Fascist states if they were to curtail the Church's freedom with any show of consistency. But it is a question of civil liberties to which an ecclesiastical body is entitled; obviously this presents a complex situation, but the principles themselves are clear and the Catholics must not compromise their intolerance.

At the same time the situation would look bleak and foreboding if we did not insist, too, that the intolerance of the Word of God, though it may show itself on a unique occasion with a whip of cord, springs from the Word breathing forth Love. It is the sweet intolerance of a Lover, insistent that the beloved may not stray from the road that leads to his home, fencing as far as possible that Way with high hedges so that no mistake can be made. If the beloved turns back through a misunderstanding, the Lover will not be content to let the error remain but will come forth with a ray of light to disperse the fog of misapprehension. That is the intolerance of the Church—it springs not only from Truth but also from Love. It springs from a saying of the Word: 'Go out into the highways and byways, and *compel* them to come in'. But this subject demands another Editorial.

THE EDITOR

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