

# Politics and Religion

From *Grey Eminence*

## I

ABOUT politics one can make only one completely unquestionable generalization, which is that it is quite impossible for statesmen to foresee, for more than a very short time, the results of any course of large-scale political action. Many of them, it is true, justify their actions by pretending to themselves and others that they can see a long way ahead; but the fact remains that they can't. If they were completely honest they would say, with Father Joseph,

*J'ignore où mon dessein, qui surpasse ma vue,  
Si vite me conduit;  
Mais comme un astre ardent qui brille dans la nue,  
Il me guide en la nuit.*

If hell is paved with good intentions, it is, among other reasons, because of the impossibility of calculating consequences.

But though it is impossible to foresee the remoter consequences of any given course of action, it is by no means impossible to foresee, in the light of past historical experience, the sort of consequences that are likely, in a general way, to follow certain sorts of acts. Thus, from the records of past experience, it seems sufficiently clear that the consequences attendant on a course of action involving such things as large-scale war, violent revolution, unrestrained tyranny and persecution are likely to be bad. Consequently, any politician who embarks on such courses of action cannot plead ignorance as an excuse. Father Joseph, for example, had read enough history to know that policies like that which Richelieu and he were pursuing are seldom, even when nominally successful, productive of lasting good to the parties by whom they were framed. But his passionate ambition for the Bourbons made him cling to a voluntary ignorance, which he proceeded to justify by speculations about the will of God.

Here it seems worth while to comment briefly on the curious time sense of those who think in political terms. Courses of action are recom-

mended on the ground that, if carried out, they cannot fail to result in a solution to all outstanding problems—a solution either definitive and everlasting, like that which Marx foresaw as the result of the setting up of a classless society, or else of very long duration, like the thousand-year futures foretold for their regimes by Mussolini and Hitler, or like the more modest five-hundred-year Pax Americana of which Miss Dorothy Thompson has spoken. Richelieu's admirers envisaged a Bourbon golden age longer than the hypothetical Nazi or Fascist era, but shorter (since it had a limit) than the final, classless stage of Communism. In a contemporary defense of the Cardinal's policy against the Huguenots, Voiture justifies the great expenditures involved by saying that "the capture of La Rochelle alone has economized millions; for La Rochelle would have raised rebellion at every royal minority, every revolt of the nobles during the next two thousand years." Such are the illusions cherished by the politically minded when they reflect on the consequences of a policy immediately before or immediately after it has been put in action. But when the policy has begun to show its fruits, their time sense undergoes a radical change. Gone are the calculations in terms of centuries or millennia. A single victory is now held to justify a *Te Deum*, and if the policy yields apparently successful results for only a few years, the statesman feels satisfied and his sycophants are lavish in their praise of his genius. Even sober historians writing long after the event tend to express themselves in the same vein. Thus, Richelieu is praised by modern writers as a very great and farsighted statesman, even though it is perfectly clear that the actions he undertook for the aggrandizement of the Bourbon dynasty created the social and economic and political conditions, which led to the downfall of that dynasty, the rise of Prussia and the catastrophes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His policy is praised as if it had been eminently successful, and those who objected to it are blamed for their shortsighted views.

Such extraordinary inconsistency can only be explained by the fact that, when people come to talk of their nation's successes, they think in terms of the very briefest periods of time. A triumph is to be hymned and gloated over, even if it lasts no more than a day. Retrospectively, men like Richelieu and Louis XIV and Napoleon are more admired for the brief glory they achieved than hated for the long-drawn miseries which were the price of that glory.

Among the sixteen hundred-odd ladies whose names were set down in the catalogue of Don Giovanni's conquests, there were doubtless not a few whose favors made it necessary for the hero to consult his physician. But pox or no pox, the mere fact that the favors had been given was

a thing to feel proud of, a victory worth recording in Leporello's chronicle of successes. The history of the nations is written in the same spirit.

## II

Most people at the present time probably take for granted the validity of the pragmatists' contention, that the end of thought is action. In the philosophy which Father Joseph had studied and made his own, this position is reversed. Here contemplation is the end and action (in which is included discursive thought) is valuable only as a means to the beatific vision of God. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, "action should be something added to the life of prayer, not something taken away from it." To the man of the world, this statement is almost totally devoid of meaning. To the contemplative, whose concern is with spiritual religion, with the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of selves, it seems axiomatic. Starting from this fundamental principle of theocentric religion, the practical mystics have critically examined the whole idea of action and have laid down, in regard to it, a set of rules for the guidance of those desiring to follow the mystical path toward the beatific vision. One of the best formulations of the traditional mystical doctrine in regard to action was made by Father Joseph's contemporary, Louis Lallemand. Lallemand was a Jesuit, who, in spite of the prevailing anti-mystical tendencies of his order, was permitted to teach a very advanced (but entirely orthodox) kind of spirituality to the men entrusted to his care.

Whenever we undertake any action, Father Lallemand insists, we must model ourselves upon God himself, who creates and sustains the world without in any way modifying his essential existence. But we cannot do this unless we learn to practice formal contemplation and a constant awareness of God's presence. Both are difficult, especially the latter which is possible only to those very far advanced along the way of perfection. So far as beginners are concerned, even the doing of good works may distract the soul from God. Action is not safe, except for proficients in the art of mental prayer. "If we have gone far in orison," says Lallemand, "we shall give much to action; if we are but middlingly advanced in the inward life, we shall give ourselves only moderately to outward life; if we have only a very little inwardness, we shall give nothing at all to what is external, unless our vow of obedience commands the contrary." To the reasons already given for this injunction we may add others of a strictly utilitarian nature. It is a matter of experience and observation that actions undertaken by ordinary unregenerate people, sunk in their

selfhood and without spiritual insight, seldom do much good. A generation before Lallemand, St. John of the Cross had put the whole matter in a single question and answer. Those who rush headlong into good works without having acquired through contemplation the power to act well—what do they accomplish? "*Poco mas que nada, y a veces nada, y aun a veces dano.*" (Little more than nothing, and sometimes nothing at all, and sometimes even harm.) One reason for hell being paved with good intentions has already been mentioned, and to this, the impossibility of foreseeing the consequences of actions, we must now add another, the intrinsically unsatisfactory nature of actions performed by the ordinary run of average unregenerate men and women. This being so, Lallemand recommends the least possible external activity until such time as, by contemplation and the unremitting practice of the presence, the soul has been trained to give itself completely to God. Those who have traveled only a little way along the road to union, "should not go out of themselves for the service of their neighbors, except by way of trial and experiment. We must be like those hunting dogs that are still half held upon the leash. When we shall have come by contemplation to possess God, we shall be able to give greater freedom to our zeal." External activity causes no interruption in the orison of the proficient; on the contrary it is a means for bringing them nearer to reality. Those for whom it is not such a means should as far as possible refrain from action. Once again Father Lallemand justifies himself by the appeal to experience and a purely utilitarian consideration of consequences. In all that concerns the saving of souls and the improving of the quality of people's thoughts and feelings and behavior, "a man of orison will accomplish more in one year than another man in all his life."

What is true of good works is true, a fortiori, of merely worldly activity, particularly when it is activity on a large scale, involving the collaboration of great numbers of individuals in every stage of unenlightenment. Good is a product of the ethical and spiritual artistry of individuals; it cannot be mass-produced. All Catholic theologians were well aware of this truth, and the church has acted upon it since its earliest days. The monastic orders—and pre-eminently that to which Father Joseph himself belonged—were living demonstrations of the traditional doctrine of action. This doctrine affirmed that goodness of more than average quantity and quality could be practically realized only on a small scale, by self-dedicated and specially trained individuals.

## III

This brings us to the heart of that great paradox of politics—the fact that political action is necessary and at the same time incapable of satisfying the needs which called it into existence.

Only static and isolated societies, whose way of life is determined by an unquestioned tradition, can dispense with politics. In unstable, unisolated, technologically progressive societies, such as ours, large-scale political action is unavoidable. But even when it is well intentioned (which it very often is not) political action is always foredoomed to a partial, sometimes even a complete, self-stultification. The intrinsic nature of the human instruments with which, and the human materials upon which, political action must be carried out is a positive guarantee against the possibility that such action shall yield the results that were expected from it. This generalization could be illustrated by an indefinite number of instances drawn from history. Consider, for example, the results actually achieved by two reforms upon which well-intentioned people have placed the most enormous hopes—universal education and public ownership of the means of production. Universal education has proved to be the state's most effective instrument of universal regimentation and militarization, and has exposed millions, hitherto immune, to the influence of organized lying and the allurements of incessant, imbecile and debasing distractions. Public ownership of the means of production has been put into effect on a large scale only in Russia, where the results of the reform have been, not the elimination of oppression, but the replacement of one kind of oppression by another—of money power by political and bureaucratic power, of the tyranny of rich men by a tyranny of the police and the party.

For several thousands of years now men have been experimenting with different methods for improving the quality of human instruments and human material. It has been found that a good deal can be done by such strictly humanistic methods as the improvement of the social and economic environment, and the various techniques of character training. Among men and women of a certain type, startling results can be obtained by means of conversion and catharsis. But though these methods are somewhat more effective than those of the purely humanistic variety, they work only erratically and they do not produce the radical and permanent transformation of personality, which must take place, and take place on a very large scale, if political action is ever to produce the beneficial results expected from it. For the radical and permanent trans-

formation of personality only one effective method has been discovered—that of the mystics. It is a difficult method, demanding from those who undertake it a great deal more patience, resolution, self-abnegation and awareness than most people are prepared to give, except perhaps in times of crisis, when they are ready for a short while to make the most enormous sacrifices. But unfortunately the amelioration of the world cannot be achieved by sacrifices in moments of crisis; it depends on the efforts made and constantly repeated during the humdrum, uninspiring periods, which separate one crisis from another, and of which normal lives mainly consist. Because of the general reluctance to make such efforts during uncritical times, very few people are prepared, at any given moment of history, to undertake the method of the mystics. This being so, we shall be foolish if we expect any political action, however well intentioned and however nicely planned, to produce more than a fraction of the general betterment anticipated. Moreover, should the amount of mystical, theocentric leaven in the lump of humanity suffer a significant decrease, politicians may find it impossible to raise the societies they rule even to the very moderate heights realized in the past.

Meanwhile, politicians can do something to create a social environment favorable to contemplatives. Or perhaps it is better to put the matter negatively and say that they can refrain from doing certain things and making certain arrangements which are specially unfavorable.

The political activity that seems to be least compatible with theocentric religion is that which aims at increasing a certain special type of social efficiency—the efficiency required for waging or threatening large-scale war. To achieve this kind of efficiency, politicians always aim at some kind of totalitarianism. Acting like the man of science who can only deal with the complex problems of real life by arbitrarily simplifying them for experimental purposes, the politician in search of military efficiency arbitrarily simplifies the society with which he has to deal. But whereas the scientist simplifies by a process of analysis and isolation, the politician can only simplify by compulsion, by a Procrustean process of chopping and stretching designed to make the living social organism conform to a certain easily understood and readily manipulated mechanical pattern. Planning a new kind of national, military efficiency Richelieu set himself to simplify the complexity of French society. That complexity was largely chaotic, and a policy of simplification judiciously carried out by desirable means would have been fully justified. But Richelieu's policy was not judicious and, when continued after his death, resulted in the totalitarianism of Louis XIV—a totalitarianism which was intended to be as complete as anything we see in the modern world, and which only failed

to be so by reason of the wretched systems of communication and organization available to the Grand Monarque's secret police. The tyrannical spirit was very willing, but, fortunately for the French, the technological flesh was weak. In an era of telephones, fingerprinting, tanks and machine guns, the task of a totalitarian government is easier than it was.

Totalitarian politicians demand obedience and conformity in every sphere of life, including, of course, the religious. Here, their aim is to use religion as an instrument of social consolidation, an increaser of the country's military efficiency. For this reason, the only kind of religion they favor is strictly anthropocentric, exclusive and nationalistic. Theocentric religion, involving the worship of God for his own sake, is inadmissible in a totalitarian state. All the contemporary dictators, Russian, Turkish, Italian and German, have either discouraged or actively persecuted any religious organization whose members advocated the worship of God, rather than the worship of the deified state or the local political boss.

Technological progress, nationalism and war seem to guarantee that the immediate future of the world shall belong to various forms of totalitarianism. But a world made safe for totalitarianism is a world, in all probability, made very unsafe for mysticism and theocentric religion. And a world made unsafe for mysticism and theocentric religion is a world where the only proved method of transforming personality will be less and less practiced, and where fewer and fewer people will possess any direct, experimental knowledge of reality to set up against the false doctrine of totalitarian anthropocentrism and the pernicious ideas and practices of nationalistic pseudo-mysticism. In such a world there seems little prospect that any political reform, however well intentioned, will produce the results expected of it.

The quality of moral behavior varies in inverse ratio to the number of human beings involved. Individuals and small groups do not always and automatically behave well. But at least they can be moral and rational to a degree unattainable by large groups. For, as numbers increase, personal relations between members of the group, and between its members and those of other groups, become more difficult and finally, for the vast majority of the individuals concerned, impossible. Imagination has to take the place of direct acquaintance, behavior motivated by a reasoned and impersonal benevolence, the place of behavior motivated by personal affection and a spontaneous and unreflecting compassion. But in most men and women reason, sympathetic imagination and the impersonal view of things are very slightly developed. That is why, among other reasons, the ethical standards prevailing within large groups, between

large groups, and between the rulers and the ruled in a large group are generally lower than those prevailing within and among small groups. The art of what may be called "goodness politics," as opposed to power politics, is the art of organizing on a large scale without sacrificing the ethical values which emerge only among individuals and small groups. More specifically, it is the art of combining decentralization of government and industry, local and functional autonomy and smallness of administrative units with enough over-all efficiency to guarantee the smooth running of the federated whole. Goodness politics have never been attempted in any large society, and it may be doubted whether such an attempt, if made, could achieve more than a partial success, so long as the majority of individuals concerned remain unable or unwilling to transform their personalities by the only method known to be effective. But though the attempt to substitute goodness politics for power politics may never be completely successful, it still remains true that the methods of goodness politics combined with individual training in theocentric theory and contemplative practice alone provide the means whereby human societies can become a little less unsatisfactory than they have been up to the present. So long as they are not adopted, we must expect to see an indefinite continuance of the dismally familiar alternations between extreme evil and a very imperfect, self-stultifying good, alternations which constitute the history of all civilized societies. In a world inhabited by what the theologians call unregenerate, or natural men, church and state can probably never become appreciably better than the best of the states and churches, of which the past has left us the record. Society can never be greatly improved until such time as most of its members choose to become theocentric saints. Meanwhile, the few theocentric saints who exist at any given moment are able in some slight measure to qualify and mitigate the poisons which society generates within itself by its political and economic activities. In the gospel phrase, theocentric saints are the salt which preserves the social world from breaking down into irremediable decay.

#### IV

To be a seer is not the same thing as to be a mere spectator. Once the contemplative has fitted himself to become, in Lallemand's phrase, "a man of much orison," he can undertake work in the world with no risk of being thereby distracted from his vision of reality, and with fair hope of achieving an appreciable amount of good. As a matter of histori-



cal fact, many of the theocentrics have been men and women of enormous and beneficent activity.

The work of the theocentrics is always marginal, is always started on the smallest scale and, when it expands, the resulting organization is always subdivided into units sufficiently small to be capable of a shared spiritual experience and of moral and rational conduct.

The first aim of the theocentrics is to make it possible for anyone who desires it to share their own experience of ultimate reality. The groups they create are organized primarily for the worship of God for God's sake. They exist in order to disseminate various methods (not all of equal value) for transforming the "natural man," and for learning to know the more-than-personal reality immanent within the leathery casing of selfhood. At this point, many theocentrics are content to stop. They have their experience of reality and they proceed to impart the secret to a few immediate disciples, or commit it to writing in a book that will be read by a wider circle removed from them by great stretches of space and time. Or else, more systematically, they establish small organized groups, a self-perpetuating order of contemplatives living under a rule. Insofar as they may be expected to maintain or possibly increase the number of seers and theocentrics in a given community, these proceedings have a considerable social importance. Many theocentrics, however, are not content with this, but go on to employ their organizations to make a direct attack upon the thorniest social problems. Such attacks are always launched from the margin, not the center, always (at any rate in their earlier phases) with the sanction of a purely spiritual authority, not with the coercive power of the state. Sometimes the attack is directed against economic evils, as when the Benedictines addressed themselves to the revival of agriculture and the draining of swamps. Sometimes, the evils are those of ignorance and the attack is through various kinds of education. Here again the Benedictines were pioneers. (It is worth remarking that the Benedictine order owed its existence to the apparent folly of a young man who, instead of doing the proper, sensible thing, which was to go through the Roman schools and become an administrator under the Gothic emperors, went away and, for three years, lived alone in a hole in the mountains. When he had become "a man of much orison," he emerged, founded monasteries and composed a rule to fit the needs to a self-perpetuating order of hard-working contemplatives. In the succeeding centuries, the order civilized northwestern Europe, introduced or re-established the best agricultural practice of the time, provided the only educational facilities then available, and preserved and disseminated the treasures of ancient literature. For genera-

tions Benedictinism was the principal antidote to barbarism. Europe owes an incalculable debt to the young man who, because he was more interested in knowing God than in getting on, or even "doing good," in the world, left Rome for that burrow in the hillside above Subiaco.)

Work in the educational field has been undertaken by many theocentric organizations other than the Benedictine order—all too often, unhappily, under the restrictive influence of the political, state-supported and state-supporting church. More recently the state has everywhere assumed the role of universal educator—a position that exposes governments to peculiar temptations to which sooner or later they all succumb, as we see at the present time, when the school system is used in almost every country as an instrument of regimentation, militarization and nationalistic propaganda. In any state that pursued goodness politics rather than power politics, education would remain a public charge, paid for out of the taxes, but would be returned, subject to the fulfillment of certain conditions, to private hands. Under such an arrangement, most schools would probably be little or no better than they are at present; but at least their badness would be variegated, while educators of exceptional originality or possessed of the gift of seership would be given opportunities for teaching at present denied them.

Philanthropy is a field in which many men and women of the margin have labored to the great advantage of their fellows. We may mention the truly astounding work accomplished by Father Joseph's contemporary, St. Vincent de Paul, a great theocentric, and a great benefactor to the people of seventeenth-century France. Small and insignificant in its beginnings, and carried on, as it expanded, under spiritual authority alone and upon the margin of society, Vincent's work among the poor did something to mitigate the sufferings imposed by the war and by the ruinous fiscal policy which the war made necessary. Having at their disposal all the powers and resources of the state, Richelieu and Father Joseph were able, of course, to do much more harm than St. Vincent and his little band of theocentrics could do good. The antidote was sufficient to offset only a part of the poison.

It was the same with another great seventeenth-century figure, George Fox. Born at the very moment when Richelieu was made president of the council and Father Joseph finally committed himself to the political life, Fox began his ministry the year before the Peace of Westphalia was signed. In the course of the next twenty years the Society of Friends gradually crystallized into its definitive form. Fanatically marginal—for when invited, he refused even to dine at Cromwell's table, for fear of being compromised—Fox was never corrupted by success, but remained

to the end the apostle of the inner light. The society he founded has had its ups and downs, its long seasons of spiritual torpor and stagnation, as well as its times of spiritual life; but always the Quakers have clung to Fox's intransigent theocentrism and, along with it, to his conviction that, if it is to remain at all pure and unmixed, good must be worked for upon the margin of society, by individuals and by organizations small enough to be capable of moral, rational and spiritual life. That is why, in the two hundred and seventy-five years of its existence, the Society of Friends has been able to accomplish a sum of useful and beneficent work entirely out of proportion to its numbers. Here again the antidote has always been insufficient to offset more than a part of the poison injected into the body politic by the statesmen, financiers, industrialists, ecclesiastics and all the undistinguished millions who fill the lower ranks of the social hierarchy. But though not enough to counteract more than some of the effects of the poison, the leaven of theocentrism is the one thing which, hitherto, has saved the civilized world from total self-destruction. Father Joseph's hope of leading a whole national community along a political short cut into the kingdom of heaven on earth is illusory so long as the human instruments and material of political action remain untransformed. His place was with the antidote makers, not with those who brew the poisons.