

THE CHURCH UNION COMMITTEE FOR CHURCH
SOCIAL ACTION

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SIXTEENTH

Summer School of Sociology
St. Hilda's College, Oxford, Sept. 30th-
Oct. 4th, 1940

THE ENGLISH SITUATION

Monday, Sept. 30th.

Social Elements in the English Tradition, Civil
and Religious: their strength and weakness.
Lecture by Mr. T. S. Eliot.

Tuesday, Oct. 1st.

The English Community as it is To-day.
Lecture by Mr. E. I. Watkin.

Wednesday, Oct. 2nd.

The Recovery of Spiritual Initiative.
Lecture by Mr. J. Middleton Murry.

Thursday, Oct. 3rd.

General discussion:
introduced by Mr. Maurice B. Reckitt.

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at St. Hilda's College. The fee for the School,
including Board and Lodging, will be £2 12s. 6d.
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A Journal of Christian Sociology

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Vol. X: No. 40

DECEMBER, 1940

	<i>Page</i>
THE ENGLISH SITUATION—: Maurice B. Reckitt	215
NOTES AND COMMENTS R.K.	223
THE ENGLISH TRADITION T. S. Eliot	226
THE RECOVERY OF SPIRITUAL INITIATIVE Charles Williams	238
JUDGMENT HAS BEGUN J. V. Langmead Casserley	250
SONG BEFORE SUNRISE 'Davitt'	253
PRAYER FROM THE BRINK M. Farrow	254
NUMBER SIXTEEN An Autumn School of Sociology at Oxford E.L.M.	255
BOOK SECTION:	
Monasticism and Feudalism Thomas M. Parker	261
Loose Stones W. G. Peck	266
REVIEWS	268
REVIEWS REVIEWED: A Quarterly Survey D.G.P.	273
BOOKS RECEIVED	276
CORRESPONDENCE. The Heads of the Old Men Paul Stacy	277

Quarterly, 2/-; Annual Subscription, 7/6; In America, 50 cts. each; \$2 per annum.

BASIL BLACKWELL - BROAD STREET - OXFORD

THE ENGLISH TRADITION

Address to the School of Sociology

By T. S. ELIOT

THE first point that strikes me about my title is that there are not two English Situations, one Civil and one Religious, but that this is one situation, and that you cannot go very far into the Civil aspect without having to consider the Religious, and vice versa. The civil history of England, and its religious history, are the same with only a difference of emphasis and detail. In this civil-religious history I find three headings, which seem to subsume all that I have to say here: I may call them Local Organization, Church and State, and Church and Dissent. Under these three headings one can discuss the social-economic history, and the political history of England, and their bearing upon the problems of the present and the future.

From my earliest acquaintance with this country I have been struck by the impression that the natural habitat of the Englishman was the small rural community, that he only accepted the industrial town and the giant metropolis as an unpleasant necessity—and perhaps all the more because of this rural instinct was indifferent to the disorderly and unchecked development of that metropolis. Such a view may seem to you to contradict your own experience, especially those of you who belong to a younger generation than my own. But I saw the English situation against the background of the transatlantic world, of a society which has grown up in and around urban foci, and therefore my eye may have been more apt to observe traces of a way of living here which preceded industrialism. It is the difference between a country in which industrialism has been imposed upon another anciently established order, and one in which settlement and industrialization were contemporary. I notice the difference even between London and any of the largest American cities; for London has grown by the gradual expansion and agglomeration of a considerable number of villages, so that its districts still have some local centres and some local character, whereas any American city is a community which has spread from one point, over an area previously uninhabited. But England has never developed the large town with even that different urban instinct shown by the structure of Paris, or other European metropolises: there is something about England which remains stubbornly attached to the

parochial. The classes which enriched themselves by trade, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were animated by the ambition to obtain a country estate and a coat of arms, retire from the City and become country gentry. Even now, I dare say that there are still to be found financiers and industrialists whose ambition for their offspring is not that they also should be financiers and industrialists but part of the 'county': even though a country estate now—if it is one that shows any appearance of prosperity—may be only a house and a park, a kind of façade bolstered up by stocks and shares. I am not defending the country gentleman for whom the country, agriculture and stock-breeding are nothing more than a hobby: I am only pointing out the anomaly that the most highly industrialized country in the world should be the one which has the least adapted itself and reconciled itself to its own industrialism.

Similarly, the English Church has a parochial system inherited with very little change from its pre-industrial age. Occasionally some reform, if you can call it that, like the composition of tithes (a problem which, in its importance for both the social and the religious life of the nation, has received only the most superficial treatment) comes to show that some change is taking place, though we do not know to what. But we have yet to face the fact that the parochial system is one not designed for the kind of community in which the greater part of our population now live. For what is implied in the support of the clergy by tithes? First, a relation between the religion of the nation and the soil of the country, and therefore to the people cultivating that soil, a relation deeper than that of free individual choice of association. It meant a church materially dependent, like the people surrounding it, upon the natural resources of the neighbourhood and the chances of the harvest, a reciprocal tie between the church and the people which drew no distinction between church-goers and the negligent, between personal belief and unbelief, a tie which was part of the structure of society and which no individual and no one generation was free to break. The parochial system implies a system of land tenure, and the assumption that it is upon the fruitfulness of the land that we all depend. It implies also a certain security and stability of status, and a local community settled on one place. It implies a community of people who know each other, whose fathers knew each other, and whose children will continue to marry and quarrel and do business with each other. It implies

everything that the tendency of industrialism is to destroy.

When we look at the very large town, we see the parochial system in full decay. True, a very able, diligent and popular priest who cares more for the people under his charge than for preferment, may build up for a time an active spiritual community in a slum neighbourhood—but one which will probably maintain its life only if it has a succession of equally able and popular incumbents. The situation of the newer suburbs is too well known to need comment. As for the more settled urban districts, inhabited by the more well-to-do middle classes, the fact that they have no strong social bond, and often do not know each other, combined with greater mobility, such that many people who regard themselves as very devout regularly attend a church in some other parish where the offices are conducted more to their liking, tends to affirm at best a congregational, rather than a parochial unity.

I should like to remind you of one other aspect of the traditional religio-social system: that a form of tenure of land suitable to an agricultural society, in which man's dependence upon the fruits of the soil created a responsible relationship, becomes grotesque when it applies to the subterranean stores of coal and minerals which are irreplaceable, and also when it applies to the ground ownership of urban land used for habitation or industry. The purpose of these remarks has been to drive home what I said at the beginning, that the civil and religious elements cannot be isolated from each other. It is not simply a problem of altering a part of the whole system to fit in with modern developments: if that were so, we might, as ecclesiastical reformers, be busy in trying to adapt church organization to a world which, as civil reformers, we were trying to change in such a way that the church would not need to be altered, or, more likely, would need to be altered on very different lines. We have the problem of trying to strike the right balance between urban and rural, between agricultural and industrial life, and the problem of the future system of the Church is bound up with that. The ignoring of the integral religious-social problem, by defenders of Christian faith, has led, I think, in the past generation to our stressing the conscious element in the lapse away from Christianity, to the neglect of what I believe to have been a more powerful cause, the social changes, the mobility, the insecurity, the mechanization of minds and the atomization of individuals in an industrial age, which have

operated unconsciously upon the mass of human beings.

It is from this point of view that I would invite you to reconsider our syllabus. It is also from this point of view that I would invite you to consider the history of Church and State in England. We can divide it roughly into the three periods, that of before the Reformation, with a decided tension between Church and State, the period of the Royal Supremacy, and the period of Parliamentary Supremacy—which itself can be divided into two periods, that of a nominally Church of England Parliament, and that of a Parliament on which no religious limitations are imposed. The Church of to-day bears traces of each stage of its past; but it is as well to remember that its history to the time of Henry VIII is not merely that of a succession of bold Becketts defying the secular power, or alternatively a patriotic struggle against monstrous Papal exactions and interferences. There was a good deal of what we should call Erastianism, certainly of nepotism, in the mediæval Church. And for Erastianism itself there is something to be said: for we are not wise to attack anything without trying to recognize its merits. At least, we must recognize a wide difference, for good and for bad, between the situation of Church and State in the later eighteenth century and that of a Church in a modern state controlled by an openly, or almost openly, infidel government. There was a great deal of corruption in the Church, but a church can be corrupt without being Erastian. The most important features of the eighteenth-century relation of Church and State were, first that it was an accommodation on a very low spiritual level, in an age infected with deism, and second that it was a precarious accommodation. The low religious level was a part of the spirit of the age; the precariousness is something likely to inhere in any complete harmony between Church and State, where there is no condition of tension between the spiritual and the temporal forces. The religious spirit of the time was of a very low temperature; but religion held an important place in the religious-social system. The Church needed better men, but the age did not produce them, either in England or elsewhere; and the religious revivalism that took place did not have the necessary intellectual structure, and so the religious element in it became overpowered by the social element. We are apt to blame the Church of the eighteenth century for failing to observe and deal with the emergence of new social problems in the latter part of the century, problems of a kind which few men in

any age ever have the vision to foresee the meaning of—and those men usually prophets to whom no one attends.

The point that I wish to make, in contemplating the degradation of the Church during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is that one can draw quite another moral than simply that of the dangers of a State Church. We have no right to assume that the Church would have been any worthier of its task if it had been free to look after itself, without interference from the politicians. There is a point, I agree, beyond which the advantages for the nation of a national Church are paid for at too great a price; but we must remember that the independence of the Church may be bought at too high a price too, if that independence relieves it of its contact with the mass of the nation.

The whole structure of the arrangement of Church and State, however, rested on the assumption that England was a Christian nation, and that there was no reason to suppose that it would cease to be so; that while difficulties might be caused by the activities of dissenters, these difficulties were more to be feared in the field of social and political activities, than in the dissemination of heretical ideas. And the assumption that England was a Christian nation was in a sense true, and in a sense remains true: it was only wrong in making the very serious confusion between two kinds of belief, and two kinds of disbelief. It ignored the fact that defection in degree is as important in the long run as defection in kind, and that a Christianity which is merely a social habit has not the strength to preserve itself in a materially changing world. It ignored the fact that popular Christianity needs support of three kinds from the exceptional individuals: the maintenance of a tradition of theology which shall be at the same time orthodox in its foundations and in superstructure constantly readapted and reinterpreted for every generation, the spirit of free enquiry and criticism in the interest of social justice, and the example of individual lives of exceptional piety and sacrifice.

The position of the clergy at this stage varied according to the social advantages, the private means, and the gifts for political self-advancement displayed by the individual. Theoretically, the clergyman was a gentleman and a scholar—or at least, a university man; and often he was; but his position might vary, in the country, from that of a kind of secondary squire to that of a superior menial. In an age when philosophic thought,

such as it was, tended to be free thought, and when theology was at a very low ebb, the talents for which the Church provided a career were of an administrative order, the kind required of a Civil Servant—the carrying out in detail the provisions of a system which was accepted and which it was not at all the business of the administrator to alter. This did not prepare the hierarchy for the needs of a changing world. By ignoring these changes, the Church became compromised by them. By failing to insist upon the importance of development in theology, of the study of problems of social justice, of private piety and holiness, it risked the danger that these three aspects of its life should eventually be insisted upon by three different types of rebel, and that the balance of emphasis in the total life of the Church should be upset.

There was another dangerous weakness in the educational ideals of the century. The foundation of the clergyman's education was classical study in one of the two universities; but upon this good foundation a very flimsy structure of theological work was often erected. As late as the first quarter of the nineteenth century, indeed in the 'thirties or 'forties, Bishop Blomfield was complaining of ordinands who, having perhaps a good classical degree, expected to cram their preparation for ordination into a period of months or even weeks. Such indecent haste would not be tolerated now, but it should be part of our examination of the English situation to consider the effect of the changes in our educational system. I do not mean only changes in the 'system,' but the more insensible changes in our educational values. The kind of education formerly given to the sort of young men who became ordinands, and which at worst had the advantage of uniformity, is now, so far as it survives, only one possible form of preparation among many. We have now the danger of imposing a better and more comprehensive theological training upon a less substantial foundation, or upon a variety of unsubstantial foundations, with consequent possibilities of babel. I do not intend to pursue the topic of education, but merely to remind you of its intimate relation to our other problems. But I think that the question of the general training desirable for clergy to-day—taking into account the different backgrounds of the candidates, and of the possibility of further more specialized training of at least three types—theology and Christian philosophy, sociology, and lastly psychology for those whose vocation is the direction of souls—

is of great importance for the future activity of the clergy in the national life. And in considering the future of education, we need to consider how the present situation came to be what it is. (I would ask one further question: must not the training of the clergy, in the future, take due account of the very different sociological situations in town and village life?) So you see that we are brought back to the fundamental problem of the balance and relation of town and country in a future Britain.

This point about education, however, was intended to be parenthetical. I wished primarily to suggest that the term 'Erastianism,' the supremacy of the State in ecclesiastical affairs, was often used loosely with the implication that this supremacy of the State was the cause of all the weakness of the eighteenth-century Church—which, I suggested, might not have been any better had it been independent. The important point about the English situation has been its diffused Christianity, rather than a sharp clerical and anti-clerical, or Christian and non-Christian division. This peculiarity must be considered also in the history of the development of dissenting sects in England. As pointed out both in the syllabus, and in my preparatory paper in CHRISTENDOM, the development of sects has not been only, or even primarily, the appearance and propagation of theological doctrines. In a society like this, in which the social-religious complex has never been wholly dissolved, though it is to-day in danger of dissolution, that is what one would expect. It can easily happen that the real elements of a conflict do not all appear. In the dissensions of the seventeenth century, the economic struggle is obscured by the social, and the social by the religious; for in an age in which religion is taken seriously, the emotions of the combatants tend to find a religious formulation. Conversely, in the last twenty years, the emotional formulation has tended to be economic and social, while the fundamentally religious differences have remained in obscurity. I am not suggesting that the religious element in sectarianism is of minor importance; only that it tends to become a symbol for all the things which bind a particular group together and distinguish it from the rest of society. Now there is a sense—we must be careful to keep this qualification—in which sectarianism in England has been no more than differences *within* a National Church. It was against the National Church, and all that that implied, at the time, of social and political associations, that sectarianism arose to protest; having that

Church to protest against was part of the *raison d'être* of the sects; each protest was that of a narrow section against a Church which itself had become, or appeared to be, too narrow to be genuinely National. It may be said that our Church is in an analogous position towards the Church of Rome, but I do not intend to go into that now. The difference between the religious and the social elements in religious separation could hardly be discerned, the analysis could hardly be made, even throughout the nineteenth century. Why are we in a different situation now?

As the syllabus should make evident, the religious and the political history of England cannot be separated, and it is perhaps the chief common defect of most histories of England that they are written with an inadequate understanding, an unexamined bias, or a lack of interest, in respect of the religious forces. The most important change in the nineteenth century was surely the displacement of High Church by Anglo-Catholic, the consequent dissociation from the Tory Party, the recruitment of Anglo-Catholics from various political groupings, and their critical attitude, inspired by their increasing attention to problems of social justice, to both of the political parties. It further happened that no political re-grouping that has taken place has been such as to weld the Anglo-Catholic movement to any one association in politics. The activity of Modernism may even prove to have contributed for good; for here was a movement, whatever we think of it, which also detached itself from the religious-social complex and formed itself around certain theological principles. Modernism has, of course, its ancestry; we can see its relation to Whig Liberalism, to the Broad Church movement, to Benjamin Jowett and so forth; it belongs socially to the more cultivated middle class and the academic bourgeoisie; but at least it has no clear political associations. And on the other hand, the decline of the Liberal Party has broken the old connection of non-conformity; non-conformists and dissenters disperse, according to their social background, into the Conservative or the Labour Party, and thus contribute to the formation of new social complexes which are no longer religious. All this has its bad aspect as well as its good; our business is not to feel gratification or regret, but to understand the situation and act accordingly. What seems to me important is that the social and political element which has heretofore been so strong in the formation and continuation of sects, is disappearing as the old

is of great importance for the future activity of the clergy in the national life. And in considering the future of education, we need to consider how the present situation came to be what it is. (I would ask one further question: must not the training of the clergy, in the future, take due account of the very different sociological situations in town and village life?) So you see that we are brought back to the fundamental problem of the balance and relation of town and country in a future Britain.

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lines of social groupings become obliterated. This social change has played, I think, a larger part in movements towards reunion than the promoters of such reunion generally seem to be aware. There are, of course, doctrinal dangers of the gravest character in precipitate fraternization; on the other hand I think the tendency brings into evidence a peculiarity of English sectarianism which distinguishes it from religious separations in other countries, owing to a tradition of National Christianity which even the moments of bitterest internecine strife have not extinguished. The weakness of this tradition lies in its insularity and its reliance upon social customs.

The second kind of weakness of the tradition, that of reliance upon social custom, is inseparable from its strength (similarly as the religious and the political history are inseparable) and we need to try to keep in mind both aspects, of strength and weakness, at the same time, if we are to avoid either remaining content with it or breaking with it. I have already analyzed it into three main weaknesses, the theological, the social, and the devotional or ascetic. As the third is perhaps the least essential to my terms of reference, I will deal with it first and briefly, but I wish to mention it because I think it adds some light to my main argument. Paul More, in his introduction to the theological anthology *Anglicanism*, says:

It was a favourite thesis of Baron von Hügel that the English Church, with all its excellencies, has failed in producing the variety and depth of the saintly life to be found within the Roman Communion. And this in a manner may be conceded. Naturally, in the matter of variety, it could not be expected that Christianity manifested through the temperament of a single people at a given time should produce as many different types of holiness as a Communion embracing a number of divergent nationalities. But if one will compare the lives in Walton with, let us say, the biographies of saints and mystics of a neighbouring country collected by Abbé Bremond, it is not at all clear that the advantage lies with Roman Catholicism. And if to the little group commemorated in Walton's inimitable pages one adds Andrewes and Barrow and Taylor and Traherne and Henry More and Sir Thomas Browne and Ken, one will have a striking variety ranging through the man of prayer, the great scholar, the golden-mouthed orator, the romantic dreamer, the Platonic idealist, the devout physician, and the irreproachable prelate.

Let us assent gladly to Paul More's commendation of his beloved writers of the seventeenth century, while recognizing that looking at the English Church from overseas, with affectionate eyes, he was inclined to praise rather than to criticize. But there is a good deal more to be said than this, and we can

hardly deny that even the most intensely devout Anglican writers of that age missed something that we find in the English mystics of the fourteenth century. The relevant point, however, is that the more modern English ideal has been rather that of the Christian subject and citizen and householder, playing his part in a society assumed to be Christian, and that while it has strongly disapproved those who fell far below the standard, it also discouraged those who aimed far above it. That is just what you would expect in that well-knitted, but limited, social-religious nexus. It disapproves of the idle and unprofitable, but among them is inclined to include the contemplative.

The indifference to theology is more relevant to our study here, because it must be considered in relation to the indifference to social justice. I am not ignoring or depreciating the great and valuable contributions to theology made during the nineteenth century and up to the present moment. What I have in mind is that the Church, partly owing to its association with the State, has not found a recognized place for the theologian. The type which, in the last two hundred years, it has tended to advance is that of the efficient administrator; and as the modern tendency has been to do away with sinecures, and as the wealth of the Church has not increased, more efficiency and harder work is required of these administrators. I know that men of great theological and philosophical distinction have reached high positions; but where their intellectual activity has not been altogether extinguished by their multifarious cares over details, it has been by a very exceptional ability to do a number of things at once. Hence the theologian, if his circumstances have been such as to allow him to pursue his intellectual researches, has operated only as an individual thinker whose views may or may not come to meet with at least a temporary acceptance. The administrative mind—I am not thinking of any particular persons, but only of the pressure which immersion in that kind of task exercises upon those employed in it—is neither conservative nor progressive, but works the machine as it finds it.

I have spoken of the position of theology in general, because of something that I mentioned earlier: the tendency, when the religious-social tradition of the people is such that the Church has neglected theology, social justice, and asceticism, for the three defects to be repaired by three different sets of zealots, instead of in collaboration. It is, I take it, a function of this

School to try to stimulate a study of social problems on the basis of sound Christian doctrine, and not leave them to the care of social reformers with merely a vague Christian spirit to inspire reform; and it has to combat two prejudices, one that the establishment of social justice needs no philosophy behind it at all, and the other that all it needs is a secular philosophy.

The reading of English political and religious history which I have tried to indicate is, I admit, a partial and selective one: I have only tried to elicit one aspect which, however, I believe to be a useful one to keep before us. It is that the general deterioration of English Christendom, in spite of valiant and noble sporadic attempts—and by deterioration here I mean not merely the falling away from some static good, but the failure to keep up with the times, for we deteriorate as much by failing to develop and adapt ourselves as by losing what had been gained—is a case not so much of direct apostasy and infidelity, not so much of the invention and propagation of non-Christian or anti-Christian opinion, as of a decline of the general level of our Christianity. We are so accustomed to the idea of the modern world as tending to divide itself sharply into Christians and non-Christians, that this other aspect may be worth consideration. So far as my historical knowledge can safely take me—and in such matters I speak with great diffidence—there is a radical difference between the development of secularism in this country and that in Protestant Germany. In the latter country, it seems to me, there was from the beginning a latent assumption that the temporal and spiritual powers had quite separate and distinct fields of action which could not conflict. In England, it was rather assumed that the ruler or rulers were Christians—for the monarch as monarch is the incumbent of a kind of ecclesiastical as well as temporal office—and that they could be relied upon to act, in temporal affairs, in as Christian a manner as these affairs permitted—that is, that according to Christian prescription, they would in any choice of evils choose that which Christian understanding advised to be the lesser evil. The notion of a neutral area, to which Christian social ethics did not apply, came, it seems to me, later; and perhaps was not fully established until political economy came to be regarded as a normative, rather than a purely descriptive science. The separation of the ecclesiastical and the temporal spheres of action, the separation between private and public morality, between the religious and the civil life of the individual, has

come about gradually and indirectly, and, if I may put it paradoxically, rather as a result of the too close union of the religious and secular than as a result of division. Puritanism has no doubt played a large part in determining the distinction between personal and business morals, but the notion that success in business was itself morally meritorious seems to have preceded the notion that business was a sphere in which private morals did not apply. In short, we have gone wrong in the course of history, rather by assuming that we were Christians in an indefectibly Christian society, than by deliberately repudiating Christian private and social ethics. At the present time—only very recently—we have begun to be aware of at least the potentiality of the revival of a sense of community in this country. It seems to me desirable that we should take what is left of the religious-social unity, and try to elevate it to a higher degree of consciousness, developing within it, rather than outside of it, that necessary tension between the temporal and the ecclesiastical, the material and the spiritual, which has, for the most part, been its chief historical defect.