CATHOLICISM

AND THE BOURGEOIS MIND

THE Colosseum has recently been criticized for its views with regard to the bourgeois and the bourgeois mind. And it is easy to understand this when we remember how tiresome and meaningless the word becomes in the jargon of communist propaganda.

Nevertheless the question of the bourgeois involves a real issue which Catholics cannot afford to shirk. For it is difficult to deny that there is a fundamental disharmony between bourgeois and Christian civilization and between the mind of the bourgeois and the mind of Christ.

But first let us admit that it is no use hunting for the bourgeois, as Mr. Denis Tegetmeier shows so effectively in one of his Catholic Herald cartoons. For we are all more or less bourgeois and our civilization is bourgeois from top to bottom. To-day the bourgeoisie is everywhere: he is to be found in the workhouse and in the House of Lords, the Labour party is his wash-pot and over Bloomsbury he has cast out his shoe. Hence there can be no question of treating the bourgeois in the orthodox communist fashion as a gang of anti-social reptiles who can be exterminated summarily by the revolutionary proletariat; for in order to “liquidate” the bourgeoisie, modern society would have to “liquidate” itself.

This is where Marx went wrong. His theory of increasing misery led him to suppose that the line of class division would become sharper and more strongly defined, until the rising tide of popular misery broke the dykes and swept away the closed world of privileged bourgeois society. Instead of this we have seen the bourgeois culture, the bourgeois mind, even the bourgeois standards of life advancing and expanding until they became diffused throughout the whole social organism and dominated the whole spirit of modern civilization.

And so in order to understand the essential character of the bourgeois, it is necessary to disregard for the moment this universalized bourgeois culture which is part of the very air we breathe and turn back to the time when the bourgeois was still a distinct social type which could be isolated from the other elements in society and studied as an independent phenomenon.

Now the bourgeois was in origin the member of a small and highly specialized class which had grown up within the walls of the medieval city commune. Far from being the average European man, he was an exceptional type standing somewhat outside the regular hierarchy of the medieval state, which was primarily an agrarian society consisting of the nobility, the clergy and the peasantry. His very existence was guaranteed by a charter of privileges which constituted the city-commune as a régime d’exception. Thus there was a sharp division of material interests and social culture between the bourgeoisie and the countryman, a division which was deepened in Eastern Europe, including Eastern Germany, by the fact that the towns of German speech and civilization were a population that was predominantly Slav. And so while the peasant laboured and the noble fought, the bourgeoisie was free to lead his own life, to mind his own business and to grow rich within the narrow limits of the medieval urban economy.

All this seems infinitely remote from the modern world. But we must remember that it was not so remote from the society to which the founders of modern socialism—Lassalle and Marx and Engels—belonged. The German bourgeoisie had only just emerged from a régime of corporate rights and privileges which bound the bourgeois to his corporation, the craftsman to his guild, the peasant to his land, and the Jew to his Ghetto. The generation before that of Marx had seen this structure collapse like a house of cards, so that the world was suddenly thrown open to any man who possessed money and enterprise—that is to say to every good bourgeois.

Thus the process which had taken centuries to develop in Western Europe was completed in Central and Eastern Europe within a single lifetime. Whereas in England and the United States, the bourgeois spirit had already become a fluid element that interpenetrated the whole social organism; in Germany, or Austria, or Russia, it was still a new factor in social life and so it was easy for Marx to separate it from the rest of society and regard it as the distinctive mark of a definite limited class.

And this explains why class hatred comes more easily to the Eastern than to the Western European. Croce has an amusing story of how an Italian delegate to a German socialist congress was obliged to apologize for the lack of class hatred in the Italian socialist movement. “We do not hate,” he admitted, “but we are quite willing to.” And in English socialism even the will to hatred has been lacking in spite of the fact that the proletariat in England suffered far more than the proletariat in Germany from the coming of
industrialism. For the leaders of English socialism have been idealists, whether bourgeois idealists like Robert Owen and William Morris or Christian socialists like Keir Hardie and George Lansbury.

But while we may well congratulate ourselves that English social life has not been poisoned by class hatred and class war, it does not follow that the complete penetration of English culture by bourgeois standards and ideals is a good or an admirable thing. It is even possible that the victory of the bourgeois has meant the destruction of elements that are not merely valuable but essential to English life, since the English tradition is something much wider and deeper than the machine-made urban and suburban culture by which it has been temporarily submerged.

Actually we have only to open our eyes to see that this criticism is justified. The devastated areas of industrial England and the cancerous growth of the suburbs are not merely offensive to the aesthetic sense, they are symptoms of social disease and spiritual failure. The victory of bourgeois civilization has made England rich and powerful, but at the same time it has destroyed almost everything that made life worth living. It has undermined the natural foundations of our national life, so that the whole social structure is in danger of ruin.

Looked at from this point of view, the distinctive feature of the bourgeois culture is its urbanism. It involves the divorce of man from nature and from the life of the earth. It turns the peasant into a minder of machines and the yeoman into a shop-keeper, until ultimately rural life becomes impossible and the very face of nature is changed by the destruction of the countryside and the pollution of the earth and the air and the waters.

This is characteristic of modern bourgeois civilization in general, but nowhere is it more striking than in England. And since English culture has been historically a peculiarly rural one, the victory of bourgeois civilization involves a more serious breach with the national tradition and a more vital revolution in ways of life and thought than in any other country of Western Europe.

But if the bourgeois is the enemy of the peasant, he is no less the enemy of the artist and the craftsman. As Sombart has shown in his elaborate study of the historic evolution of the bourgeois type, the craftsman like the artist has an organic relation to the object of his work. "They see in their work a part of themselves and identify themselves with it so that they would be happy if they could never be separated from it." For in the capitalist order "the production of goods is the act of living men who, so to speak, incarnate themselves in their work; and so it follows the same laws that rule their physical life, in the same way as the growth of a tree or the act of reproduction of an animal, obeys in its direction and measure and end the internal necessities of the living organism." The attitude of the bourgeois on the other hand is that of the merchant whose relation to his merchandise is external and impersonal. He sees in them only objects of exchange, the value of which is to be measured exclusively in terms of money. It makes no difference whether he is dealing in works of art or cheap ready-made suits; all that matters is the volume of the transactions and the amount of profit to be derived from them. In other words his attitude is not qualitative but quantitative.

It is easy enough to see why this should be. For the bourgeois was originally the middleman who stood between the producer and the consumer, as merchant or salesman or broker or agent or banker. And thus there is not merely an analogy but an organic connection between the role of the bourgeois in society and the economic function of money. One is the middleman and the other is the medium of exchange. The bourgeois lives for money, not merely as the peasant or the soldier or even the artist often does, but in a deeper sense, since money is to him what arms are to the soldier and land is to the peasant, the tools of his trade and the medium through which he expresses himself, so that he often takes an almost dishonest interest in his wealth because of the virtuosity he has displayed in his financial operations. In short the bourgeois is essentially a money-maker, at once its servant and its master, and the development of his social ascendency shows the degree to which civilization and human life are dominated by the money power.

This is why St. Thomas and his masters, both Greeks and Christians, look with so little favour on the bourgeois. For they regarded money simply as an instrument, and therefore held that the man who lives for money perverts the true order of life.

"Business," says St. Thomas, "considered in itself, has a certain baseness (turpitude) inasmuch as it does not of itself involve any honourable or necessary end."

We find this criticism repeated at the time of the Renaissance by humanists like Erasmus; indeed it is the basis of that aristocratic
prejudice against the bourgeois which has never entirely disappeared and which reappears in all sorts of forms from sheer idealism to pure snobbery in the most unlikely times and places.

The classical Marxian opposition of bourgeois and proletariat is but one of a whole series of oppositions and class conflicts which the rise of the bourgeoisie has aroused. There is the aristocratic opposition of which I have just spoken. There is the opposition of the artist which did so much to bring the name of the "bourgeois" into disrepute in the nineteenth century. There is the opposition to the bourgeois in so far as he is the representation and incarnation of the money power—an opposition which has found a new expression in the Social Credit Movement. And finally there is the opposition between bourgeois and peasant, which is more fundamental and deep-rooted than any of them.

But while all these oppositions are real and each implies a genuine criticism of bourgeois culture, none of them is absolute or exhaustive. There is a more essential opposition still, which has been pointed out by Sombart and which goes beyond economics and sociology to the bedrock of human nature. According to Sombart, the bourgeois type corresponds to certain definite psychological predispositions. In other words there is such a thing as a bourgeois soul and it is in this rather than in economic circumstance that the whole development of the bourgeois class and the bourgeois culture finds its ultimate root. In the same way the opposite pole to the bourgeois is not to be found in a particular economic function or interest, as for instance the proletariat or the peasant, but rather in the anti-bourgeois temperament, the type of character which naturally prefers to spend rather than to accumulate, to give rather than to gain. These two types correspond to Bergson's classification of the "open" and "closed" temperaments and they represent the opposite poles of human character and humane experience. They are in eternal opposition to one another and the whole character of a period or a civilization depends on which of the two predominate. Thus we are led back from the external and material class conflict of the Marxians to a conception not far removed from that of St. Augustine, "Two loves built two cities"; the essential question is not the question of economics, but the question of love. "Looking at the matter closely," writes Sombart, "we get the impression that the opposition between these two fundamental types rests in the final analysis on an opposition of erotic life, for it is clear that this dominates the whole of human conduct as a superior and invisible power. The bourgeois and the erotic temperaments constitute, so to speak, the two opposite poles of the world." Sombart's use of the word "erotic" is of course wider than the current English term. Unsatisfactory as the word "erotic" is, it is the best we have, for "charitable" is even more miserably inadequate. Our bourgeois culture has reduced the heavenly flame of St. Paul's inspired speech to a dim bulb that is hardly strong enough to light a mothers' meeting. But Sombart expressly distinguishes it from sensuality which may be found in either of the two types of temperament. Indeed, the erotic type par excellence in Sombart's view is the religious mystic, the "man of desire," like St. Augustine or St. Francis.

Viewed from this point of view it is obvious that the Christian ethos is essentially anti-bourgeois, since it is an ethos of love. This is particularly obvious in the case of St. Francis and the medieval mystics, who appropriated to their use the phrasing of medieval erotic poetry and used the anti-bourgeois concepts of the chivalrous class-consciousness, such as "ardent," "noble" and "gentle" in order to define the spiritual character of the true mystic.

But it is no less clear in the case of the Gospel itself. The spirit of the Gospel is eminently that of the "open" type which gives, asking nothing in return, and spends itself for others. It is essentially hostile to the spirit of calculation, the spirit of worldly prudence and above all to the spirit of religious self-seeking and self-satisfaction. For what is the Pharisee but a spiritual bourgeois, a typically "closed" nature, a man who applies the principle of calculation and gain not to economics but to religion itself, a hoarder of merits, who reckons his accounts with heaven as though God was his banker? It is against this "closed," self-sufficient moralist ethic that the fiercest denunciations of the Gospels are directed. Even the sinner who possesses a seed of generosity, a faculty of self-surrender and an openness of spirit is nearer to the kingdom of heaven than the "righteous" Pharisee: for the soul that is closed to love is closed to grace.

In the same way the ethos of the Gospels is sharply opposed to the economic view of life and the economic virtues. It teaches men to live from day to day without taking thought for their material needs. "For a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things..."
which he possesses.” It even condemns the prudent forethought of the rich man who plans for the future: “Thou fool this night do they require thy soul of thee and whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?”

Thus so long as the Christian ideal was supreme, it was difficult for the bourgeois spirit to assert itself. It is true, as Sombart insists, that the bourgeois class and the bourgeois view of life had already made its appearance in medieval Europe, but powerful as they were, especially in the Italian cities, they always remained limited to a part of life and failed to dominate the whole society or inspire civilization with their spirit. It was not until the Reformation had destroyed the control of the Church over social life in Northern Europe that we find a genuine bourgeois culture emerging. And whatever we may think of Max Weber’s thesis regarding the influence of the Reformation on the origins of capitalism, we cannot deny the fact that the bourgeois culture actually developed on Protestant soil, and especially in a Calvinist environment, while the Catholic environment seemed decidedly unfavourable to its evolution.

It is indeed impossible to find a more complete example in history of the opposition of Sombart’s two types than in the contrast of the culture of the Counter Reformation lands with that of seventeenth-century Holland and eighteenth-century England and Scotland and North America. The Baroque culture of Spain and Italy and Austria is the complete social embodiment of Sombart’s “erotic” type. It is not that it was a society of nobles and peasants and monks and clerics which centred in palaces and monasteries (or even palace-monasteries with the Escorial), and left a comparatively small place to the bourgeois and the merchant. It is not merely that it was an uneconomic culture which spent its capital lavishly, recklessly and splendidly whether to the glory of God or for the adornment of human life. It was rather that the whole spirit of the culture was passionate and ecstatic, and finds its supreme expressions in the art of music and in religious mysticism. We have only to compare Bernini with the brothers Adam or St. Teresa with Hannah More to feel the difference in the spirit and rhythm of the two cultures. The bourgeois culture has the mechanical rhythm of a clock, the Baroque the musical rhythm of a fugue or a sonata.

The ideal of the bourgeois culture is to maintain a respectable average standard. Its maxims are: “Honesty is the best policy,”

“Do as you would be done by”, “The greatest happiness of the greatest number.” But the baroque spirit lives in and for the triumphant moment of creative ecstasy. It will have all or nothing.

Its maxims are: “All for love and the world well lost,” “Nada, nada, nada,” “What dost thou seek for, O my soul? All is thine, all is for thee, do not take less, nor rest with the crumbs that fall from the table of thy Father. Go forth, and exult in thy glory, hide thyself in it and rejoice, and thou shalt obtain all the desires of thy heart.”

The conflict between these two ideals of life and forms of culture runs through the whole history of Europe from the Reformation to the Revolution and finds its political counterpart in the struggle between Spain and the Protestant Powers. It is hardly too much to say that if Philip II had been victorious over the Dutch and the English and the Huguenots, modern bourgeois civilization would never have developed and capitalism in so far as it existed would have acquired an entirely different complexion. The same spirit would have ruled at Amsterdam as at Antwerp, at Berlin as at Munich, in North America as in South, and thus the moment when Alexander Farnese turned back a dying man from his march on Paris may be regarded as one of the greatest turning points in world history. Even so it is quite conceivable that Europe might have fallen apart into two closed worlds, as alien and opposed to one another as Christendom and Islam had it not been that neither culture was strong enough to assimilate France. For a time during the first half of the seventeenth century, the Counter Reformation and its culture carried everything before them, but the bourgeois spirit in France was already too strong to be eliminated and it allied itself with the monarchy and the Gallican church against ultramontane Catholicism and Baroque culture.

Although the classicist and Gallican culture of the age of Louis XIV was far from being genuinely bourgeois it contained a considerable bourgeois element and owed a great deal to men of bourgeois class and bourgeois spirit, such as Boileau, Nicole and even perhaps Bossuet himself. The resultant change in the spirit of French religion and culture is to be seen in that “retreat of the mystics” of which Bremond speaks and in the victory of a rather hard and brilliant Rationalism which prepared the way for the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Thus French eighteenth-century culture became an open door through which the bourgeois spirit penetrated
the closed world of Baroque Catholicism, first as a leaven of criticism and new ideas and finally as a destructive flood of revolutionary change which destroyed the moral and social foundations of the Baroque culture. The uneconomic character of that culture left it powerless to withstand the highly organized financial power of the new commercialist bourgeois society. It went in the same way as the Hellenistic world succumbed to the sceptical organization of Roman imperialism. Nevertheless it did not succumb without a struggle, for wherever the common people possessed the power of organization and the means of defence, and wherever the religious tradition of the Counter Reformation had struck deep roots in the soul, they fought with desperate resolution and heroism in defence of the old Catholic order, as in La Vendée in 1793, in Tirol in 1809, and in the Basque provinces till late in the nineteenth century.

With the passing of the Baroque culture a vital element went out of Western civilization. Where its traditions survived into the nineteenth century, as in Austria and Spain and parts of Italy and South Germany, one still feels that life has a richer savour and a more vital rhythm than in the lands where the bourgeois spirit is triumphant. Unfortunately the breach with the past seems too great for Europe to recover this lost tradition even when the bourgeois civilization is decaying and exhausted. Men look for an alternative not to the humane culture of the immediate Catholic past but to the inhuman mass civilization of Russia or to the barbaric traditions of German paganism, while in our own country we are abandoning the competitive selfishness of the older capitalism only to adopt a bourgeois version of socialism which is inspired by a humanitarian policy of social reform, derived from the liberal-democratic tradition. It aims not at the proletarian revolutionary ideal of the communists but rather at the diffusion of bourgeois standards of life and culture among the whole population, the universalizing of the bourgeois rentieri type.

Whatever may be the future of these movements there can be little doubt that they mark an important change in the history of the bourgeois civilization and that the age of the free and triumphant

1 These popular risings may be compared with the peasant risings against the Reformation in XVIIth century England. In each case it was the common people and not the privileged classes who were the mainstay of the resistance.

2 It is obvious that this ideal is identical in aim, if not in method, with the Social Creditors' ideal of dividends for all.

progress of Western capitalism is ended. Capitalism may well survive but it will be a controlled and socialized capitalism which aims rather at maintaining the general standard of life than at the reckless multiplication of wealth by individuals. Yet the mere slowing down of the tempo of economic life, the transformation of capitalism from a dynamic to a static form will not in itself change the spirit of our civilization. Even if it involves the passing of the bourgeois type in its classical nineteenth-century form, it may only substitute a post-bourgeois type which is no less dominated by economic motives, though it is more mechanized and less dominated by the competitive spirit. It may even be, as so many Continental critics of English society suggest, the bourgeois capitalist order in a sullen and decadent form. As we have already pointed out, the character of a culture is determined not so much by its form of economic organization as by the spirit which dominates it. Socialization and the demand for a common standard of economic welfare, however justified it may be, do not involve a vital change in the spirit of a culture. Even a proletarian culture of the communist type in spite of its avowed hatred of the bourgeoisie and all his works is post-bourgeois rather than anti-bourgeois. Its spiritual element is a negative one, the spirit of revolution, and when the work of destruction is accomplished, it will inevitably tend to fall back into the traditions of the bourgeois culture, as appears to be happening in Russia at present. Thus, while Western communism is still highly idealistic and represents a spiritual protest against the bourgeoisie spirit and a reaction against the victorious industrial capitalism of the immediate past, Russian communism is actually doing for Russia what the Industrial Revolution did for Western Europe, and is attempting to transform a peasant people into a modern urban industrial society. No economic change will suffice to change the spirit of a culture. So long as the proletarian is governed by purely economic motives, he remains a bourgeoisie at heart. It is only in religion that we shall find a spiritual force that can accomplish a spiritual revolution. The true opposite to the bourgeoisie is not to be found in the communist, but in the religious man—man of desire. The bourgeoisie must be replaced not so much by another class as by another type of humanity. It is true that the passing of the bourgeoisie does involve the coming of the worker and there can be no question of a return to the old régime of privileged castes. Where Marx was wrong was not in his dialectic of social change,
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but in the narrow materialism of his interpretation which ruled out the religious factor.

The fact is that Marx was himself a disgruntled bourgeois, and his doctrine of historic materialism is a hang-over from a debauch of bourgeois economics and bourgeois philosophy. He was no great lover, no "man of desire," but a man of narrow, jealous, unforgiving temperament, who hated and calumniated his own friends and allies. And consequently he sought the motive power for the transformation of society not in love but in hatred and failed to recognize that the social order cannot be renewed save by a new principle of spiritual order. In this respect Marxian socialism is infinitely inferior to the old Utopian socialism, for St. Simon and his followers with all their extravagances had at least grasped this essential truth. They failed not because they were too religious but because they were not religious enough and mistook the shadows of idealism for the realities of genuine religion. Yet we must admit that the Church of their day with its reactionary Gallicanism and its official alliance with the secular power gave them some excuse for their end.

To-day Catholics are faced with a no less heavy responsibility. There is always a temptation for religion to ally itself with the existing order, and if we to-day ally ourselves with the bourgeoisie because the enemies of the bourgeoisie are often also the enemies of the Church, we shall be repeating the mistake that the Gallican prelates made in the time of Louis XVIII. The Catholic Church is the organ of the spirit, the predestined channel through which the salvific energy of divine love flows out and transforms humanity. It depends on the Catholics of a particular generation, both individually and corporately, whether this source of spiritual energy is brought into contact with the life of humanity and the needs of contemporary society. We can hoard our treasure, we can bury our talent in the ground like the man in the parable who thought that his master was an austere man and who feared to take risks. Or, on the other hand, we can choose the difficult and hazardous way of creative spiritual activity, which is the way of the saints. If the age of the martyrs has not yet come, the age of a limited, self-protective, bourgeois religion is over. For the Kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force.

FOUR COMFORTABLE SAYINGS

The following passages by Léon Bloy are translated by permission of the Mercure de France from a collection of essays entitled "L'Enigme des Lieux-Communs." So far as I know this is the first appearance in English of any of Bloy's work. Bloy, who calls himself "The Pilgrim of the Holy Sepulchre" and "The Pauper," passed most of his life in a condition of frightening indigence. He was born in 1858 at Perigueux and his life coincided with the most virulent period of Progress. Almost alone he saw the writing on the wall, and with the pen of St. Jerome he denounced the anathema of liberalism and the enslavement of man to matter which lay behind the fine promises of naturalism and positivism. Maritain wrote of Bloy that he was a Christian of the second century who had strayed into the Third Republic. His voice is the true Christian voice raised against the sacrilege done to man's nature, the sacrilege of smashing the mirror which should reflect the image of Christ. He was a voice crying in the wilderness then but his importance grows day by day as the profound rightness of his vision becomes apparent. Berdyaev called him a prophet. He is one of the men who matter in the Christian Revival and his work will live.

It would be quite impossible to give any impression of his strange genius in these short extracts. But we hope to print an article on Bloy in our next issue, written by Jacques Martinin, who was one of his most intimate friends.—EDITO.

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS

Respectable and severe as all the popular clichés are, I think this one is the most forbidding and imposing of them all. It is the king of clichés, the culminating expression of the century. One must understand it, however, and the gift of understanding isn't given to everyone. Poets and artists, for example, don't really understand it; and people who once were called Heroes and Saints don't understand it at all.

The business of health, of the spirit, of honour, of the State and even of civil service is utterly different from Business—which can't be anything but Business and which needs no qualification nor adjective.

To be in Business is to be in an Absolute. A Business man is a stylite who can't come down from his pedestal. He must never have a thought, a feeling, an eye, an ear, a nose, a taste, a touch