

Editorial

“Bishops should not meddle in politics”—this statement, which has lately been on the lips of the Government, brings back into the forefront of discussion an issue which many may have thought was settled once and for all in the seventeenth century. The Church, in a way which has not been seen in England since then, is at odds with the state, and the fabric of the 1662 settlement seems to be more at risk today than at any time since the surge of popular non-conformity in nineteenth century politics.

What are the rights and wrongs of the present debates? On the one hand, it must be remembered, that what we are witnessing in England is a pale reflection of something which has been going on for over fifty years in other parts of the world. It may be said to have begun in 1934, when a number of German theologians declared their open dissent from the Hitler régime in the famous *Barmen Declaration*. Today most people would agree that they were right, and courageous in their opposition, though the fact that it happened at all was a sign that the ancient links between the Christian Church and the secular state in Western Europe were rapidly changing their character.

Since 1945, Christian opposition to secular régimes has become a standard feature of life in many parts of the world. Behind the Iron Curtain, the conflict is obvious and probably irresolvable, as long as a totalitarian state professing atheism retains a monopoly of power. More surprising perhaps, is the opposition which has emerged in Latin America, where Roman Catholic priests have often been in the vanguard of revolutionary movements, seeking to overthrow a corrupt and oppressive system. Liberation Theology, a curious blend of Old Testament exegesis and semi-Marxist fervour, has become the leading ideology of the churches in that part of the world, and its influence has been felt everywhere—in Britain as much as in South Africa or Southern Asia.

There remains, of course, one great bastion of power where religion and authority continue to march hand in hand—the United States. There, the Moral Majority, the New Right and various Evangelical groupings have practically sanctified the Reagan régime, even though Reagan himself is far from being a devout or consistent believer. The American scene is not one which attracts many outsiders, because to us it appears to be vulgar and slightly unscrupulous, but there is no denying that conservative Christians are at least as vocal, in favour of their government in the USA, as others are in opposing the state elsewhere.

Britain, as usual, stands somewhat in the middle and somewhat apart from overseas developments. Our bishops are still nominally Crown appointees, and the spectacle of them displaying such ingratitude to their benefactors is bound to be distressing to the latter. There is no doubt that the leaders of Church opinion are now generally slightly to the left of centre, when the popular mood, even in the average pew, is rather more to the right of it. The bishops in fact are reflecting views which were quite widely held in the 1960s, but which have now gone out of fashion—something which is surprising only to those who have not yet realised that the spokesmen of Church opinion have usually been at least 20 years behind the times.

We cannot now return to the cosy era when bishops merely reflected the views of the government of the day, but nor should we follow the slide into headlong opposition. Here we have something to learn from the present Pope, who in the best traditions of Calvin has been telling his clergy to get out of politics, and to preach the Gospel. The Gospel will speak to the political situation of every age, but it does so in a way which cuts across party bias, and points men to Christ. Our bishops and would-be politicians should heed their first calling, and attend to a preaching of the Word which will do more to change the world than a thousand wars or revolutions.

GERALD BRAY

Mr. Raymond Johnston

The death of Mr. Raymond Johnston, the Chairman of our Editorial Board, took place on October 17, as we went to press. We extend our sympathy to his widow and her family.

An appreciation will be published in our next issue.