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The Rebellious Christian

By KLAUS MANN

A GREAT MANY BOOKS have been written about the decline and fall of the French republic — personal histories, factual accounts, sociological treatises, gossip "inside stories," bombastic manifestos: the complex and dismal subject has been examined and dramatized in every conceivable fashion. Some of these books are brilliant, many of them are mediocre. Examples of both varieties have been translated into English and brought out by American publishers. But the most important and most stirring testimony is not yet available in an American edition: *Lettre aux Anglais*, by Georges Bernanos, appeared in Rio de Janeiro — modestly presented, teeming with misprints.

This negligence on the part of the American publishers is all the more surprising if one considers the extraordinary literary prestige Bernanos enjoys in this country, particularly among Catholics. His religious novels, *Sous le Soleil de Satan* and *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, — both sensational successes in France as well as in the United States — are widely recognized as works of the highest rank and of authentic originality. But only few Americans know that Bernanos is also one of the most remarkable political pamphleteers.

The faithful Catholic began his career as a publicist with a flamboyant protest against the Catholic Church — or rather against the policy of certain Catholic circles in regard to the civil war in Spain. Like other leading French Catholic writers — but even more grimly and passionately than Maritain and Mauriac — Bernanos, in *Les Grands Cimetières sous la Lune*, came out against General Franco and for the Loyalists. In *Scandale de la Vérité* he arraigned the French reactionaries who, in collaboration with their English friends, had hatched and carried out the sinister plot of Munich. In *Lettre aux Anglais* his message is addressed to the Anglo-Saxon people, but it still deals mostly with Europe and, above all, with France.

By analyzing the reasons and implications of a national tragedy, the tragedy of France, Bernanos reveals the spiritual sources of an international

drama in which all of us are vitally involved. His testimony has a direct and significant bearing on the future of our civilization. His wrathful, sorrowful words, indicting the traitors of the French republic, are relevant also to conditions, or to dangerous potentialities, in other countries.

Not that Bernanos doubts the inevitability of Hitler's eventual defeat: as far back as 1940, he seems to take an Allied victory for granted. Hitler lost his war when he failed to break the morale of the British people. The turning point was Dunkirk. But victory is not sufficient in itself: it might be exploited, polluted, depreciated by an international clique of intriguers and profiteers. "*Anglais, notre malheur peut être un jour le vôtre,*" the French patriot in his Brazilian exile keeps warning his English friends. "Do try to grasp the lesson inherent in the French calamity! As long as I live, I shall repeat that the moral debacle of my country has been caused by the natural guardians of the national conscience: they are the culprits — the very men who now cynically exploit the defeat. *The same type of men will tomorrow try to exploit your victory. . . .*"

Who are those "types" Bernanos hates and challenges? He calls them "*les médiocres*," "*le juste milieu*," "*la bourgeoisie*" (this term conceived in a psychological, strictly non-Marxian sense), and "*les vieillards*" — those who dodge all clear decisions and disguise their cowardice as "realism": "*comme si la lâcheté n'était pas le risque suprême, la seule imprudence irréparable.*"

His merciless eloquence is directed against the politicians, the diplomats, the appeasers; the men of cunning schemes and shoddy ethics; the conformists, the reactionaries, the medio-critics, the worshippers of a sterile, selfish "*sécurité*." He attacks not only morbid villains like Hitler and Mussolini, but also cynical opportunists like Georges Bonnet and Pierre Laval; ambitious demagogues like Charles Maurras; lukewarm "liberals" like André Maurois. He lashes the "elites" who have failed in their vital tasks and consequently, no longer deserve the privileged place

they still occupy. He indicts the dignitaries of high politics, big business, literature, clericalism.

Being profoundly devoted to the noble values and traditions of the Catholic Church and of ancient France, he senses the lack of integrity and of validity in the ostentatious bigotry of the French *bourgeoisie* now adhering to the Vichy regime. The faithful Christian bitterly resents the utilitarian alliance between Church and capitalism. "I daresay," he writes, "that our *bourgeoisie* began to become unethical — more or less consciously — at the very moment when it discovered the vocabulary of Christian ethics for its own ends."

The paramount concern of what Bernanos terms as "our *bourgeoisie*," is *money* — nothing else. Money — as an idol, as the supreme motive power — assumes a truly diabolical character in his vision. He conceives it as the cardinal evil, the arch enemy of Christian civilization.

His main complaint is not that money actually rules our society but that it assumes the rôle of a legitimate master, a moral and spiritual authority. The identification of Prestige and Profit is unbearable to his uncompromising mind. "It is our plutocracy," he proclaims, "which has to be beaten in its gigantic struggle."

Not that he disregards or underestimates the signal dangers involved in an anti-capitalistic crusade. "A blind revolt against capitalism," he says, "might endanger, indeed, destroy a civilization the structure of which is based on money entirely." And, then, is not Nazism such a "blind revolt"?

The most furious outbursts against the money-consciousness of our civilization occur, characteristically, in an open letter to the Americans, or rather, in a message to the President of the United States as the representative of the American people and one of the leaders of modern society. This manifesto, a kind of sequel to the main body of the *Letter to the English*, opens with an impressive warning not to overrate the power of wealth, not to underrate the spiritual resources still alive — if only latently — in an impoverished, exhausted Europe. A great European admonishes his American friends, "*Méfiez-vous de l'Europe, Américains!*" No doubt, most of you take it for granted that the old Europe will emerge depleted of all creative energies from this ghastly nightmare. But Europe is not old, to begin with; only its institutions are obsolete. The peoples of Europe are by no means overaged; only

the European elites have to be rejuvenated. The present crisis does not resemble a crisis of senility. . . ."

He speaks as a European: "Europe has been an incomparable intellectual center; she will never renounce the privilege she assumes, rightly or wrongly so, namely, to lead and stimulate the spiritual life of the world. . . . If Europe proves unable to save our civilization, she will ruin it. . . ."

And he speaks as a Frenchman: "For France is the heart of Europe. I know many idiots have made this statement before me. Yet I do not blush to write it down once again, as it happens to be true. My country is the heart and the conscience of Europe. That is not to say that it is better than the others, but that it reacts more vividly to both good and evil appeals. It was the first one to fall sick, and it will be the first to recuperate."

And he draws this conclusion: "My dear Mr. Roosevelt, when the democracies have won this war, the peoples of Europe will not yet be satisfied. Your people will be satisfied, perhaps, but not the Europeans. . . . The peoples of Europe will not easily forgive the democracies for having defended them so reluctantly, or not having defended them at all. For, at the end of this war, the peoples will be the victors. And, believe me, a victorious Europe will be difficult to control. . . ."

If Bernanos seems at times unduly hard on the Americans, one has to consider the historical moment in which he composed his message: it is dated September, 1941, three months before Pearl Harbor. There can be no doubt that his feelings toward the United States have considerably altered since — just as his attitude toward England, which had been rather irreverent in 1939, changed after Dunkirk and the Battle of London. This modification of Bernanos' views and accents, by the way, is not exclusively due to historical events but also, in part, to his own moral and intellectual development. Not that his literary talent was immature when he wrote *Sous le Soleil de Satan* and *Les Grands Cimetières sous la Lune*. But he was less detached, at that point; less sober and less objective, more given to emotional exaggerations. Exile and loneliness, far from disconcerting or paralyzing this proud, incorruptible mind, deepened his vision.

Bernanos dislikes the term "principles." "I do not need principles," he writes, "as I am a Christian. I do not have principles, but I have a faith, and

this faith, which advises me to love my fellow-men, invites me also to understand them, which is still the safest and most loyal way of loving them." And, again, with characteristic intellectual pride: "Not to understand, is the one unbearable disgrace."

To scorn principles but to depend on faith may seem a peculiar attitude for a man with political ambitions. But, then, Bernanos hardly aspires to a career in the Chamber of Deputies or in the Foreign Office. What he claims — or, in a sense, has even now accomplished — is the rôle and mission of a spiritual mentor and advisor. His opinions, therefore, are less important than is his moral personality — the spirit behind, or *in*, his opinions.

Whatever "program" he offers may sound a trifle quaint and muddled. He keeps raving about "*l'ancienne France*," "*la Monarchie populaire française*," the saints, the heroes, the chivalrous traditions. Evidently he believes ardently not only in Christianity but also in metaphysical legitimacy of the Church and in the sacred rights of "*les Princes*" — that is, the House of Bourbon. What he visualizes seems a kind of People's Kingdom with medieval rituals and socialist institutions.

This perfect government, at the same time progressive and aristocratic, is by no means conceived as a dictatorship of the clerico-fascist type: Bernanos protests emphatically against the idea that he might indulge in "*quelque monstrueuse rêverie de domination cléricale*." But what matters is not so much the political form in which he wishes his ideals to be realized, as the authenticity and persuasion of his idealism. Any little journalist can make beautiful words about honor and liberty. But when Georges Bernanos speaks of honor, as he does very frequently, his voice rings true — forceful and inspiring. He is sincere beyond any doubt when he addresses himself to certain profit-conscious "democrats": "You may expect great advantages from liberty; I desire but one — honor."

His confidence and his authority are altogether derived from this basic concept: that the mystery of Christ's incarnation implies and guarantees the fundamental dignity and ultimate salvation of the human race. "Christianity even defies man," he says. The mortal sons of the immortal Father may go astray, but they cannot be doomed. The Father loves His sons. "*L'Amour, voilà le mot qui conclut. L'Homme libre, seul, peut aimer.*"

L'Homme Libre — the Free Man — has one formidable antagonist — the pagan form of absolute government, the Cæsarian dictatorship, the idolatry of the State. That is why Georges Bernanos opposes fascism with such ardent determination: he conceives it as the resurrection of pagan, anti-Christian tyranny. The fascist dictator, like Cæsar, wants to be worshipped. But the early Christians would fight with lions and tigers, rather than pay homage to the idol of worldly power. They know what Bernanos calls "*l'Esprit de Révolte*" — that holy defiance of the martyrs whose glorious legends survive the power and even the names of their torturers.

Bernanos believes that we are going to witness another epoch of such tremendous suffering and spiritual heroism. We have reached the lowest point of the curve, he tells us; the period of man's degradation approaches its end at last. Those most bitterly experienced in the disgrace of servitude — the humiliated peoples of Europe — may give the example of a great awakening, the signal for a devastating, yet creative, insurrection. Today they risk, and seemingly waste, their lives by opposing foolhardily their godless, merciless masters. Do they realize that they are the revolutionary vanguard of Christianity?

It is from them — from those anonymous heroes, from the peoples themselves — that Bernanos expects the salvation of our culture, the rejuvenation of our faith. They will conquer, those unknown warriors, and they will not permit the appeasers and profiteers to cheat them out of their victory. It is *theirs*: they will know how to use it.

It is a great book — virile and passionate, high-minded and truthful, essentially different from all the other writings about the French and European disaster. Most refugees are nostalgic and retrospective; they indulge in memories, explanations, and accusations. Not so Georges Bernanos. His vision is bold and constructive, for all its apparent conservatism; confident, for all its bitterness. There is something infinitely refreshing, something tonic and sturdy, in his attitude and his style. He writes beautifully, in a firm, resolute rhythm, with popular wit and effortless elegance. At times his manifesto soars to the heights of true inspiration.

There he is! — Georges Bernanos of France: an upright man, an authentic personality, an admirable writer. "*Voilà un homme!*" as Napoleon said about another great European, Goethe.

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