

BLACKFRIARS

A MONTHLY REVIEW

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NO ESCAPE	The Editor	1
A FRENCH REVIEW REAPPEARS	R. P. Maydieu, O.P.	6
MISSIONARIES FOR RUSSIA	Mara	10
BEVERIDGE DEBUNKED?	M. P. Fogarty	14
NATIONALIZATION & THE BANKS	G. Jansens, O.P.	19
THE AGE BEFORE PRINT	Kenelm Foster, O.P.	25
REVIEWS: Reviews from Abroad; Church Unity;		31
French Literature.		

NO ESCAPE

As the evils of the present age increase, there are bound to be many attempts at escape. Even before the bomb fell on Hiroshima and wiped out in one instant tens of thousands of defenceless Japanese there had been many enterprises and experiments which were, in fact, elaborate bunk holes through which some men hoped to run from present evil. And of course they were the more enlightened who felt the need to escape. They could see that modern society, built on avarice and material foundations, was beginning to topple over. They could see the war coming, springing from the false view of man implied in industrialism. They tried to found self-supporting communities, back to the land, back to the simple life, where they could cut adrift from modern commitments and live on their own and by the sweat of their own brows. Or if they preferred to look for a more isolated solution, individuals or single families would seek out some remote spot of the earth's surface untarnished by chromium plate and electric light. It was not only Gaugin in Tahiti, Psichari in the Foreign Legion, or Bernanos in Brazil, but a quite normal American family trekking through Dalmatia and Italy, or an English family fleeing to the hills or Isles of the remoter parts of Britain. It was even de Foucauld in the Sahara and the many who sought the enclosed contemplative orders.

All these were not consciously seeking an escape; few indeed were consciously seeking for anything but life, life for themselves, life for the world. They wanted by their communities to solve the problem of the hour and show how life could be lived. But in fact it was nearly always flight, flight from the machine age, flight from

industrialism, flight from mass produced lives. The de Foucaulds were perhaps the only exception because the negative motive is insufficient for a contemplative vocation. If fear and flight is the motive they cannot stay. But many did stay in their cloistered lives, and de Foucauld triumphed himself—after a lonely death. These others, they mostly came to grief; many back to the land movements, many Christian communities have sprung up like mushrooms in the night and like mushrooms have been gathered in the first flush of dawn.

If it was thus before the last war it is inevitable that it will be so now after Hiroshima and the blitzing of the Rhineland, after directed labour and the trussed-up lives of millions during the war and after it. It is time, therefore, as we open another fretful, uncertain year, 1946, when we shall continue to reap the unhappy harvest of six years war-cultivation, it is time to warn people that there is no escape. We are in a heavy sea indeed, but we have no lifeboats or belts. We must all sink or sail together.

It belongs to the nature of our present civilisation that it is ubiquitous. There was a time once, when a tribe could arise at a call from its God, cut across the sea, made dry for their escape, and leave the empire, the very civilisation in which it had been growing, far behind, the waters having joined to sever communications. But it is now no longer a question of a single empire like Egypt, a unit on the face of the globe. Our civilisation is in fact global; no seas can now sever communications, be they never so Red. If you rise up and leave America with your own tribe, of wife and children, you will find America in the metalled roads, the mechanised bars, the radios and the cinemas of Dalmatia or Albania. If you flee away from Birmingham or Manchester to the Outer Hebrides, you will find the same civilisation there. Indeed, there are parts of the world that have not yet come into step, perhaps in Tibet or Central Africa, but the inhabitants there are falling over themselves until they can get into step. It is now only a question of degree as between empire and empire, nation and nation. All men are learning to worship the same gods—efficiency, speed, mechanisation. There are some who still tranquilly worship their tribal gods in their present surroundings, and sing their tribal songs, handed down from hundreds of years before gunpowder, steam, or the internal combustion engine, began to encircle the globe. But their children are hankering for the cinema, are trekking to the towns for wages, for the necessary oblations to offer speed and efficiency. There is no job for Moses: the Israelites are now Egyptian.

It is not a question merely of space. It is not simply that there

does not happen to exist a few square miles of free space where we might find or make our land of promise. Even if an island could be found, where we could live as anchorites cut off from the rest of mankind, there would yet be no escape. We should bring mankind with us; we should bring the modern gods, the modern standards with us. For the birth of an individual human being is not so unique an event as to be without relation to other human affairs. Each one is born a member of society. At one time that society was a tribe, a nation, or even an empire; but now that society is the human race. Each child is saddled with the world-wide civilisation at birth. It really is a *member* of that society, a limb, a living part, not a dead unit like just one more pebble on the beach. The child is no pebble, it is a member. This society is in his blood, is a living part of him. He cannot escape from his society any more than he can escape from his own life—except by death, and even his death is the death of a member with its effect and repercussions on the rest of the body.

What if he decides to cut adrift? What if he denies these world-wide deities, blasphemes against the worship of wealth and power, vows poverty and uproots himself from all possessions? What if he stands as a prophet denouncing his babylonish brethren? He may indeed be in revolt, but he is in revolt against part of his own being. If he renounces society, he is renouncing himself. This is evident if you compare the man who has as yet not been drawn into the vortex of modern civilisation, the man who is in it, accepting and enjoying it, and the man who revolts against it. The peasant fisherman on a remote island lives his life happily enough, not out to make a pile, or overreach his neighbours, but if he is offered the chance of ready-made bread without the labour of milling and baking, he will seize the opportunity. Now, if the third type of man points out the mortal danger of the peasant's being dragged into the vortex, the argument may be beyond the peasant's understanding. In this case he gradually becomes one of the contented worshippers of moloch, he joins the second class of men—indeed he was in that class already. He is a member of a diseased society with that disease slowly cankering unheeded. But should the arguments prove successful and he be persuaded to refuse the city bread, to spurn the engine and screw offered for his boat, to thrash his son returning from school with American ideas in his head and pieces of a radio in his hand, then he has become a reactionary. He has lost the tranquillity of his peasant life and taken on something of the sophistication of the third class of man, in revolt and reaction, always fighting against what is clawing at him from within. He

has become self-conscious, as all who try to break away must become self-conscious, watching their own steps as they try to walk away. It is impossible to act as though this present civilisation did not exist. If a man could blot out for himself this civilization he would never consider it, it would never come into his mind. That is why attempts at leading a simple, more primitive life, break down, for life is no longer simple or primitive and no one can make it so any more than he can add to his stature one cubit. A man, or a group, can set out to lead a life independent of modern complexities, but they are embarrassed, self-conscious; others can see them, and they cannot, no matter how they try, forget those others. If momentarily they blanken their minds they are only as ostriches in the sand. The disease of society is as much in these reactionaries; the difference is that they can feel it there and they are trying to run away from it, like the cat with a bag tied to its head—walking backwards.

To a Christian this should be clear—that there is no escape from the society into which one is born. For it is not a question of culpability, of co-operating in the evil; but it is a question of responsibility for society as Christ himself was not guilty of, but responsible for, the ailing human society into which he was born. If anyone had a right to be cut off and apart from the society into which he was born, it should surely have been the Son of Man, born without original sin, born hypostatically united to the Godhead. But had that been so the Incarnation and Redemption would be senseless mimicry and "make-believe". The Incarnation means that the Son of God, becoming man, involved himself in human affairs so much as to take on, not only all human perfections, but all human imperfections, save only sin. He became a curse, because Adam and the seed of Adam were accursed. He was a man with men, not a superman standing apart; he was a member of our society, a living member. Mary herself brought him into a diseased world, and he was diseased, he was mortal and suffered pain. There was no escape for Christ. He was not simply a voice up on the Mount telling men how to get out of the mess they were in; he was down among them, living their life, suffering their pain. Absolutely speaking there was just one chance of escape—for him. His divine nature could have wrested him from his human society—but "nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

For Christians to-day, members willy-nilly of a world-wide society, the opportunity of co-operating with Christ is far greater. They are now members, not of a tribe or nation, but of all human society, even in the natural order, not simply as children of grace. And

there is no escape; it is for them, as it was for Christ, the will of the Father of all mankind, that they drink the chalice. The only way out is the way through. Each one is a responsible member of society and he is responsible for society, in some way as Christ was responsible for all men. By trying to run away men are trying to shelve responsibility in a far more despicable way than the lovers of bureaucracy, who leave it all to the State. For the socialised man does not shelve responsibility through fear, but mainly through laziness and because the disease is in him unheeded. But when a man knows of the leprosy in him and his brethren, it is cowardly, desperate fear that makes him want to run away and leave his responsibility at home—yes, at *home*, where he was born and nurtured, where he ought to, and indeed *must*, live.

The implications of this fact that there is no escape are countless and of great moment, all of them. Here we have only space to point to a few. It means, not that attempts at forming Community-life are bad and hopeless, but that all such attempts should be made with a view to the rest of society. A community should be formed in order to save not the members of the community but the whole of society. It is useless to lament that a community cannot become wholly self-supporting, to frown on Birmingham-produced saucepans, and Chicago-tinned meat. Such things are inevitable—even in a Carthusian cell; they are not lamentable; they affirm the common responsibility for Birmingham and Chicago. The Carthusian offers his prayers, offers his life for Sheffield and Leeds, Dusseldorf, Milan and Hiroshima too. For he is responsible for Hiroshima and the wasted lands of Europe. The Community of "Back to the Landers" must take this responsibility too. If they are out to save their skins they are doomed; if they are out to offer their lives, as Christ was out of Jerusalem to offer his life for Jerusalem, they will have achieved much even if they break up.

How foolish to stand aside and think that Non-resistance will achieve Peace. There is no escape to Peace. We have to "win through" to Peace, win through our own death. The crucifix is not the model of non-resistance; it is the picture of the greatest of all Resisters who bore all men on his shoulders.

How proud to stand aside and criticise the society in which I live as though I were above it, not part of it. I can only criticise society, criticise the Government, criticise Hiroshima and the Waste Lands of Europe if I release that such criticism is self-criticism. I cannot stand aside; I am immersed in it. To change society I must change myself. And the only way out is the way through—now. There is no escape.

THE EDITOR.