

Priests into poets

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BY E. R. WICKHAM

OURS is a functional society, a very utilitarian, and a secular society. All of which is to say that the meaning of man is integrally related to what he does, and that what he does must be necessary and meaningful to society. So we understand a doctor, a scientist, a motor mechanic, a typist and a dustman—even an invalid, the unemployed, the aged and the retired, who can be defined in terms of being temporarily or permanently beyond their function. Were we living in an age of faith, in the religious epoch of mankind, no function would be more esteemed than that of the priest, the clergyman and pastor. But what of the priest in a secular society, or in a society rapidly becoming secularised? He stands as the most ambiguous of men, not only to those outside the Church where they stop to consider it, but to the priest himself where he is most sensitive to the secular world to which he is called to minister.

I well remember how this struck me as a young priest when the war broke out in 1939. I had been ordained only a few months previously to a tough parish on Tyneside when the black-out descended and killed dead every activity in the parish. The Essential Work Order required every man and woman within certain age limits to register with the Ministry of Labour and National Service—excluding the blind, the mentally infirm and the clergy. of course its intention was to leave the deployment of the clergy to their superiors. In fact, I put on a tin hat and visited in the air-raid shelters, opened a Citizen's Advice Bureau, and preached on Sunday nights in the market place on the "spiritual issues of the war"—until the parish was laid flat by bombing and I went as chaplain to the largest of the Royal Ordnance factories. But there's a parable here. What is the rôle of a priest in a secular society?

The Ordinal of the Prayer Book gives a job-definition. . . . To read Holy Scriptures in the church. . . . To instruct the youth in the catechism. . . . To baptise infants, and to preach. . . . To search for the sick and poor people in the parish. . . . To seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for his children in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ forever. It's all there really, but what does it mean and how is it done in our mass urban society, in a Welfare State, in one that has lost deference for the Church, and in a secular society

that by definition finds the "vertical dimension," the idea of God, blurred if not completely erased? Here is the problem of the priest.

OF course the problem of the contemporary Church is larger than the problem of the minister. It is fashionable—and I think true—to say that ultimately the most crucial demand on the Church is to produce and discover an active laity whose faith is relevant to their secular life. And the clergy are inseparable from that task. But underlying the ferment of new thinking—in all the churches—are questions that clergy have been asking about themselves. Not all the clergy perhaps, but enough to have made a considerable stir.

The most radical and costly answers to those questions were those given by the worker-priests in France from the end of the war. They answered the question of what a priest might be in the industrial proletariat, Communist *monde ouvrier* of France, until they were suppressed by an embarrassed Vatican. There is an immense literature about them, now crowned by a superb study "The Church and Industrial Society" by Grigor Siefer (Darton, Longman and Todd, 50s, 25s paperback). It is worthy of the grandeur of its subject, a fine historical work and a poignant study of the ambiguity of priests seeking to discover a relevant ministry in a secular society.

Inevitably in Britain the scene is less dramatic—but the problem not less acute. Indeed, it's more complex, more subtle. Just because the lines between the Church and the world are harder to draw, the illusion can be stronger, the problem for the minister can be even more baffling. It can be illustrated by an ecumenical symposium that has just appeared, "Preparing for the Ministry of the 1970s" by H. G. G. Herklots, James Whyte and Robin Sharp (SCM Press, 7s 6d). This book says some wise things on the training of ministers, but its general diffusion of ideas and the hopes reposed in little reforms witness to our failure to measure up to the problem. It says too many little, if useful, things—and not sharply enough the few things essential, to meet the demands upon training for relevant ministry in a secular world. Essentially the task is to train men to be poets and painters, who see things in a rather different way, and interpret them therefore in a deeper way than we usually do. Then it means being alongside people, and articulating for them what they too might see, often infuriating them, sometimes animating them with "impossible possibilities." Even the idea of the beyond in the here-and-now, to use the modern jargon, might make sense. Be the world as secular as hell, there is no evidence that this isn't still necessary.

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