



Towards a Christian Society

being the

Inaugural Address

delivered by

His Excellency the Governor of
New South Wales

(Lord Wakehurst)

WAKEHURST, Lord (John de Vere Loder). *and Boren*

at the Opening of the Religion and Life
Convention in the City Hall, Newcastle
N.S.W., on Sunday, 6th September,
1942.

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INTRODUCTION

It would hardly be possible to imagine a more significant gathering than that which you have asked me to address. We hear a good deal about the spiritual issues of the war. It is sometimes said that we are fighting for Christian principles. But when we enquire what part those who profess and call themselves Christians are playing as an organised body, we find them divided among a number of Churches, unable to speak with one voice or to take united action.

The initiative of the Bishop of Newcastle, to whom I am sure you would like me to convey the sincere thanks of this audience, is providing a wonderful opportunity for discussing some very important aspects of Christian co-operation. I am glad to say that all denominations have responded heartily. Let me make it clear, however, that this is not a Re-union Conference. The participants must agree to differ on many points of doctrine and Church government. They have, nevertheless, a common fund of Christian dogma. Common action should be possible at least in many secular matters of mutual interest. In this way the full strength of Christian influence could be directed at a common aim, and that aim must surely be the ordering of the world towards a Christian Society.

The argument I am going to put before you this afternoon can be summarised in a few sentences.

I do not think anyone will dispute that we are fighting for the survival of a civilisation whose development has been profoundly influenced by Christianity. Ever since Christianity was accepted by the Roman Empire, Christian ideals have been the aim of the peoples of Europe and of European stock. Our own generation has seen the first large scale apostasy since the rise of Islam. We are faced with movements which do not merely call attention to the shortcomings of Christian civilisation, but flatly deny the validity of Christian premises. This is being done not only by certain governments which have defied the State, but by large numbers of individuals in all countries. Christians must rally to meet this challenge. The conception of Christendom must be revived. The unity of the Church, in the sense of the Body Christian, must be reaffirmed. And once Christians have got together, there must be a new appeal, a new Crusade, to be preached to believers and unbelievers alike, just as the Gospel was preached to both Jews and Gentiles in apostolic times.

I have found it convenient to group my remarks round three questions: **Why** do we want a Christian Society? **What** do we mean by a Christian Society? **How** shall we move towards a Christian Society? I shall take each question in turn and try to give you an answer to the Why, the What, and the How of our problem.

WHY?

Let us begin, then, by asking why we want a Christian Society? The broad reason is that Christianity teaches a way of life, and therefore requires a social expression. But there is a special reason why we particularly need a more Christian society to-day. We are fighting a totalitarian idea of Society which makes a God of the State. That is not **our** idea of society. What, then, is the alternative? The only alternative that will supply the necessary dynamic force is the Christian idea of Society with its acknowledgment of a transcendent God and of man's dependence on Him. This is what St. Augustine meant when he wrote: * "I asked the earth and it said, 'I am not God': and whatsoever is in it confessed the same. I asked the sea and the deeps, and all that, swimming or creeping, live therein; and they answered, 'We are not thy God, seek above us.' I asked the wandering winds, and the whole air with its inhabitants spoke: 'I am not God'. I asked the heavens, sun, moon and stars. 'Nor are we', said they, 'the God whom thou seekest.' And I replied unto all these things which encompass the the door of my flesh, 'Ye have told me of my God, that ye are not He; tell me something of Him'. And they cried all with a great voice, 'He made us'. My questioning them was my mind's desire, and their beauty was their answer."

I spoke just now of finding a dynamic force in Christianity. It is certainly there, but, unfortunately, we do not seem to be making full use of it. The first thing we must therefore do is to find out what is hindering Christianity.

A number of negative reasons can be given for the decline of Christian belief, such as the failure of Christians to practise what they preach, and the unpopularity of what is generally called "organised religion". I shall deal with some of these later on, when we examine the attitude of Christians and the Church to Society in general. At this point, I want to talk about some unchristian ideas, which have gained much acceptance of recent years, and to which can be traced, through the decline of the Christian tradition, any failure of our war effort to reach its highest possible level and stay there.

I suppose, if everyone were asked why we are fighting this war, the great majority of replies would contain something about freedom and democracy; but I am afraid a great many people would only be expressing a vague hope of becoming well enough off to do as they like. If we are honest with ourselves, we shall admit that material well-being occupies so large a place in our scheme of life that there is not much room for higher goals. Too many of us are thinking about what we can get out of the war, or how we can stick to what we have already got. When we wonder, as we only too often have reason to do, why our undoubtedly just cause makes such halting progress, and why we have to face so many grievous setbacks, should we not seek the reason in our inability to forget ourselves in a transcending faith and purpose?

Now this sad state of affairs is, I believe, largely due to the undermining of the Christian foundations of Western civilisation, the white-anting of the framework of Christendom, by philosophies

which have taught the omnipotence of the human mind and man's consequent independence of God. We have had the rational man of Rousseau, the economic man of Marx, and the Tarzan-like superman of Nietzsche, to mention some of the most significant variations on the same theme—all of them calculated to make man conceited, self-seeking, arrogant, cynical, and unruly. The growth of this modern paganism broke up the background of belief and conduct which has been generally accepted in Europe for centuries. A great unifying and restraining influence was removed. Individualism was allowed to run wild. Even collective action developed a sectional individualism of its own. One of our greatest needs to-day is to restore the balance which the Christian background gave and can still give.

Between chaos on the one hand and tyranny on the other, democracy seems to point a middle path. Christianity and democracy go well together, but we must beware of accepting all interpretations of democracy as consistent with Christianity. Mr. Christopher Dawson†, one of the most important of our contemporary thinkers, even goes so far as to suggest that, in striving after greater efficiency, democracy may develop a kind of totalitarianism of its own. There is, in fact, a form of democracy, derived from Rousseau's theory of the Social Contract, with its reliance on human self-sufficiency, which is quite contrary to Christian democracy, with its conception of Natural Law, and of the ultimate authority of God. The contrast is made very clear by Mr. A. C. F. Beales in that rather solid but extremely able book of his in the Penguin series, called "The Catholic Church and International Order". He puts the two sets of ideas in parallel columns. On one side is the Christian idea that man's rights are limited by God's rights; on the other side is the pagan notion that there is nothing beyond man's rights. Freedom, according to Christian democracy, is freedom to do what we **ought** to do; not just what we **like** to do. Christian democracy teaches that Truth is conformity to a divine standard, not to a standard created by the human mind. It also teaches that the law of God's will is above any human law. We only acquire rights by fulfilling our duties, and, before even our duty to our neighbours, we have our duty to God. This is why religion can claim first place in our lives.

It is difficult to say how far our democracy has been penetrated by un-Christian ideas, but the process has certainly gone alarmingly far. The question is whether the embers of what was once a blaze of Christian ardour can be fanned into flame again, whether it is possible to make active and positive once more the underlying Christianity of Western Civilisation. We want a Christian Society because, otherwise, Western Civilisation will either succumb to negative influences, or must rely on pagan impulses for its hopes of revival. The warning voices of fifteen hundred years ago, when Europe was slipping into the night of the Dark Ages, speak to us still across the centuries. We may say with St. Jerome, "The strength of the barbarians is in our sins". I hope we shall never feel like saying with St. Ambrose: "We are assisting at the world's setting."

* "Confessions" X.6. quoted in Robert Bridge's "The Spirit of Man".

† In his "Beyond Politics".

WHAT?

I must now turn to the question, "What do we mean by a Christian Society?" So as to keep to practical politics, I am going to exclude, for the purpose of this address, consideration of any theocratic state such as that the Jews under the Judges or the Maccabees, and of any community of Saints in which the righteousness of individuals would make government in the ordinary sense of the word unnecessary. I want you to understand by a Christian Society, an existing political unit in which Christians and the Church play their full part; a Society in which individuals exercise their responsibilities as citizens in a Christian spirit, and in which the State acts according to Christian principles. This, I think, is the idea we shall all have at the back of our minds when we discuss the specific subjects allotted to subsequent sessions of the Conference, and this is the idea that I am going to try and make clear to you. If anyone thinks I am making too much of the social role of the Church, to the neglect of the primary purpose of the Church, namely the worship of God, and that I am ignoring the Christian's duty of personal sanctification, I would ask you to remember that we are not discussing dogma but co-operation in secular matters, and that the social field is the one in which co-operation is most clearly indicated.

It is evident that there are two approaches, an individual and a collective, to this matter. On the one hand we may try to make individuals more Christian, so that their influence may gradually Christianise whatever social system they may happen to live under. On the other hand, we may try and give a Christian form to the social frame work itself, so that those who live within it are obliged to conform to a Christian pattern, though many may be nominal rather than practising Christians.

These two approaches are really complementary; they can both be used simultaneously. There is, however, a tendency to regard them as opposites, because some people think of the Church as the community of the redeemed who are saved **out of the world**, whereas others look upon it as the instrument of the fulfilment of God's purpose **in the world**.[‡] The difference these points of view may make in the individual's outlook comes out very clearly in some words of Miss Dorothy Sayers* (who, it may surprise you to hear, is prominent as an Anglican theologian, besides being a famous writer of detective stories). "If," she says, "the power of the State and the general tone of civilisation are such that a Christian cannot agree to them without sacrificing his loyalty to God, what is he to do? Is he to carry on under persecution, accepting the evils about him as inevitable, clinging to his personal integrity and bearing witness to his faith so long as the world will let him, and accepting martyrdom when the moment comes? Is his witness, that is, to be purely personal and exemplary? Or is he to take active steps—not only individually but as a member of an organised Church—to alter the constitution of the State and the conditions of civilisation?"

I am not at all certain that this is a necessary dilemma. It is surely possible for us to try and save our individual souls and at the

same time to act collectively to save the world. There is what seems to me a mistakenly isolationist flavour about the idea that we need only worry about "personal religion". If we carried this view to its logical conclusion, we should have to say that Christians must never compromise with "the world", that they must, if necessary, withdraw and live apart, that any attempt to develop a Christian Society is futile, that there is nothing we can dignify with the name of Christendom or Christian Civilisation, and that there is nothing to be gained by close or organic relations between Church and State. I am sure that this would be going too far for all but a small minority. What most people **do** feel, I think, is that individuals must become better if the world is to become better. We cannot, however, exercise our full influence as Christians by individual action. Collective action is necessary, and this is where Church membership comes in.

At this point, then, the question arises of what is the right relation of the Church to Society. There is much uncertainty and some confusion about this, at any rate in the lay mind. It seems as if the Church was faced by much the same problem as the individual. Ought it or ought it not to intervene in secular affairs? And, if so, what part can it properly play?

We are often told that the Church ought to give a lead, but this can mean several different things. I have no doubt, for example, that Churchmen could set a better example than they do, though we need not, perhaps, go so far as Dr. Ingram, the former Bishop of London, who once jokingly suggested issuing people with prayer-carpetts because he attributed the success of Mohammedanism largely to the habit of praying in public.[†] On the other hand, if giving a lead means telling people what to do in this or that particular circumstance, many would resent being ordered about by an ecclesiastical authority in secular matters. Those who accuse the Church of failing to give a lead are often the first to criticise any expression of opinion by the Church on current problems.

"Where does the Church stand?" asks Mr. Middleton Murry, a well-known English writer on religious subjects.[‡] Has it any "relevant pattern of goodness"? Has it any answers to "the simple and urgent questions which the working of modern society puts to the ordinary conscience?" Or is it wrong to expect leadership from the Church in social questions, seeing that social action is only a secondary part of the Christian mission? "If a decisive Christian influence is conceivable," says Mr. Murry, "let us go for it—but go for it hard, not perfunctorily . . . If this is not possible, then let us say so plainly, so that Christians can try to build a different society. Or, thirdly, if it is felt that time and experience alone can tell us whether this society is compatible with or inimical to a Christian way of life, and that Christians must prepare themselves to endure a long period of watchful waiting—then let that be said." Mr. Murry would evidently like the Church to assume an active role, but has no confidence in its ability to do so. He seems oppressed by the hopelessness of moulding the social structure in a Christian direction. This is perhaps understandable, but we must not give way to what someone has called "the exasperation of despair".

[‡] See "Then and Now", by John Foster.

* At the Malvern Conference, January, 1941.

[†] Speech to the Church Congress at Stoke-on-Trent, 2nd October, 1911.

[‡] At the Malvern Conference, January, 1941.

The Church is even less justified than the individual in taking up an escapist or defeatist attitude. The Church cannot stand aloof in times like these, when every effort must be made both to save society from collapse and to build up the City of God. The Church is actively and organically related to society. It is a universal corporate reality to which society should correspond. "The Church," wrote Carlyle,* "what a word was there; richer than Golconda and the treasures of the world! Strong was he that had a Church; the vague, shoreless Universe had become a firm city for him, a dwelling which he knew."

The present Archbishop of Canterbury has suggested a division of Christian activities into three categories. The first is the preaching of the Gospel, with the injunction that all men should be guided by it in both public and private life. This is the particular sphere of the Church itself. In the second place, there is the formulation of Christian principles derived from the Gospel and the bringing of these principles into relation with contemporary problems. This is the task of theologians and other competent thinkers, both clergymen and laymen, the "commandos" of the Church, as one might say. Thirdly, there is the working out of practical, political, or other programmes which shall conform to Christian principles. This is the business of the ordinary citizen, and it is here that difference of opinion may most justifiably occur, for people who agree about the goal often disagree about the best means of reaching it.

This statement seems to me to have the great advantage of allotting a definite task to the Church while giving ample scope for free individual Christian activity. Moreover, it avoids the danger of any apparent competition between the ecclesiastical and secular authority. I have suggested that the Church cannot stand aloof from secular affairs, but it is just as important that the Church should not be open to the charge of taking sides. Miss Sayers observes that the ordinary person resents the intrusion of politics into the pulpit for this reason. "He feels obscurely," she says, "that when the parson talks of making politics part of his religion, he is doing something perilously like making religion a part of his politics. And although the parson, as a man, has a right to his opinions like anybody else, yet, when he speaks from the pulpit, he is committing not only himself but the Church . . . If, then, the Church commits herself, as a Church, to the support of any particular form of political government, and especially if she uses her influence to bring that government into power and keep it there, she will find herself insensibly adopting and maintaining not only its secular organisation, but also its underlying assumptions, which may be very strongly in conflict with her theology."

The consequences of the identification of the Church with a political regime are plainly shown by the events of the French and the Russian revolutions. In de Tocqueville's classic description of France in 1789 (p. 8), it is said that "it was in the character of a political institution, far more than that of a religious doctrine, that Christianity inspired such fierce hatreds; it was not so much because the priests assumed authority over the concerns of the next world, as because they were landowners, landlords, titheowners, and administrators in this world; not because the Church was unable to find a place in the new society which was about to be constituted,

* "French Revolution".

but because she filled the strongest and most privileged place in the old society which was doomed to destruction." The same might be said of Tzarist Russia. Let it be remembered, however, that I am talking about the **identification** of a Church with a political regime. This does not mean that all close legal and constitutional relations between Church and State are to be condemned. On the contrary, there is much to be said for a relationship which gives religion an official recognition. The point I am making here is that the Church should neither be so bound up with the social order as to have a **vested interest** in it, nor so detached from it as to appear **uninterested** in social questions. What I think we should most of us like to feel is that the Church is **concerned** with social questions, but is **disinterested** in the sense that it has no axe to grind.

HOW?

I now come to my last question—How shall we move towards a Christian Society? How shall we mobilise the Christian forces? How shall we plan the Christian strategy?

It will, I think, be apparent from what has already been said that, however great may be the importance of the individual as Churchman or citizen, central direction must come from the Church itself. Unfortunately, we have to talk in terms of the Churches rather than the Church. This is a serious drawback, for it is very difficult to sustain the case for Christianity as the solution of the world's troubles when Christians are themselves divided. We do not want our divisions to have the same result as they did in the time of Mohammed, when most of Eastern Christendom was overwhelmed because of a decline of the Christian tradition in Asia and Africa. We cannot expect to eliminate sincere and, for the present, irreconcilable differences of doctrinal opinion. It is, indeed, better to recognise them than to attempt a sham reconciliation through some formula that only papers over the cracks. But, behind the sectarian issues, and largely unaffected by them, there exists a great concourse of ordinary Christians who want to act together, and who are only waiting for the call that will stir them into action. It is encouraging to find how definitely Christian leaders have been exerting their influence in the direction of Christian unity, especially since the war began.

"The dangers and anxieties we have encountered in these times of ours," said the Pope in October, 1939 (in the Encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*), "may well give strength to the reflection that a **common peril**, one and the same everywhere, hangs over us all." And, in the fifth of the Peace Points contained in the Pope's allocution to the College of Cardinals on Christmas Eve, 1939, he said that the people "must be guided by that universal love which is the compendium and most general expression of the Christian ideal, and which, therefore, may serve as a **common ground** for those who have not the blessing of sharing the same faith with us."

In December, 1940, a letter appeared in the "Times" signed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, and the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council. This letter accepted the Pope's five points and added five further points as "standards by which economic situations and

proposal may be tested." These ten points may therefore be taken as existing common ground for making Christian principles "the foundation of national policy and of all social life", which is stated to be the **common aim**. The letter is referred to in our programmes and the ten points have been made the basis of the discussions which will take place at this Conference.

Recently, a very definite step in co-operation has been taken in England. At the end of May this year it was announced in the Press that "a joint standing Committee of the Anglican and Free Churches, and the Roman Catholic Church" had been established under the Chairmanship of the Bishop of London, Dr. Fisher, with the warm approval of the Archbishop of Canterbury and of Cardinal Hinsley, Archbishop of Westminster. The Bishop of London is reported to have said in a broadcast that the business of the Committee would be "to assist and stimulate the co-operation which has already begun in many localities, and particularly to co-ordinate the work of the two organisations" respectively representing Protestants and Roman Catholics, namely the "Religion and Life Movement", embracing the Anglican and Free Churches, and the Roman Catholic "Sword of the Spirit Movement".

The Conference which we are inaugurating to-day might well explore the prospects of similar co-operation in Australia between Christians who are alive to the common peril, anxious to seek the common ground, and eager to promote the common aim of which the Church leaders have spoken.

You may have noticed that the Bishop of London spoke of "the co-operation which has already begun in many localities." I hear that a number of Councils of Christian Congregations and United Christian Executives have sprung up in England. They have been brought into being chiefly through wartime conditions, but they mean more than joint action during air raids. They aim at keeping before the public the example of Christian conduct and fellowship. They try to make Christian influence felt in the local administration of social services concerned with employment, education, housing, family life, or whatever it may be.

A great deal of shyness and suspicion, engendered by sectarian differences, has had to be overcome. It is true that we indulge less than our fathers in what has been called "theological Billingsgate", but members of different Churches do not always say nice things about each other, and there are many places where the clergy of different denominations are only distantly polite. But, when they are called upon to work together, people learn to see one another as colleagues instead of as rivals, to respect each other's points of view and, indeed, to become real friends. Then, it will not be long before they begin to think together, which is very necessary when we consider the importance of an instructed Christian opinion about the problems which are likely to face us after the war. Theological controversy has its proper place, but, for the purposes of social life, we should minimise, not exaggerate religious differences. They will probably be found less in practice than in theory.†

Besides co-operation between Christians of different denominations, we have also to think of co-operating with those who are

not attached to any Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury has told us that "Christians must actively co-operate with all who share their convictions with regard to policy and action, even though they do not share the faith on which, for Christians, these are grounded".‡ In a recent book called "Christian Crisis" Mr. de la Bedoyere, the editor of the London "Catholic Herald", develops a similar plea for mobilising the forces of good on the Christian side, wherever we find them. Besides the Churches, he says, there are many organisations which share certain moral values with Christianity, and so have some link with the divine plan from which the Church herself derives. He goes on to affirm that even an avowed enemy of organised religion may "not only set himself and his followers a high standard of observance, but also retain in personal and social life a great deal of the natural law (such as keeping his word, paying his debts, being kind to a suffering neighbour, etc.) as well as enforcing for his own good such civic virtues as obedience to the constituted authority and the various obligations of the law . . . The virtue of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek to impose in the secular order an alternative plan. It is not a rival to a multitude of "isms". It seeks only to guide and check and harmonise the ends which men freely chose, according to their tastes, traditions, national ideals and the like. Thus the true Christian in Spain will see things in a Spanish way, the true Christian in a Labour movement will see things as Labour sees them; but both, in doing so, should all the time be doing all he can to maintain these different ideals within limits that are consistent with God's order, as he knows it from his religion to be."

At the very beginning of my address I said that we must start a new Crusade. The primary object of every word I have spoken this afternoon has been to help mobilise the Christian forces so as to establish a united front against the forces of anti-Christ. And let no one under-estimate the strength of these forces. We know what fanatical devotion the "Party" organisation of a totalitarian State can arouse. Can we honestly say that Christians have a comparable enthusiasm? Pastor Niemoller, whose heroic stand against the nazification of religion in Germany has earned him the martyrdom of a concentration camp, told Dr. Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, that, to Nazis, their National Socialism is "a primary obligation"—all else is secondary; on the other hand, he said, many Christians make their Churchmanship secondary and put other things first. The Bishop rightly says that we must "recover the sense of the obligation to Christ and His Church being primary".*

Elsewhere in that excellent book of his called "Christianity and World Order" in the Penguin Series (p. 37), Dr. Bell calls attention to the vehement tone of the prophets, and of the writers who heralded the Christian era. "This revolutionary note," he says, "is found in both the Old and New Testaments, and, if we want to understand the teaching and background of Christ, it must never be muffled. Shall I be over-stepping the mark if I say that the revolutionary note is the one we ought to hear sounded to-day? The idea of a Christian revolution is not, I may add, peculiar to parsons or exponents of uplift in general. For instance, those of

† Recent developments in inter-denominational co-operation in England are dealt with in "Christian Reunion" by Hugh Martin.

‡ Broadcast published in the "Listener" for 31st October, 1940.

* "Christianity and World Order" p. 144.

you who have read "European Spring", by that noted American journalist, Miss Clare Booth, will remember how she ends up by proclaiming Christianity as our only hope.

One by one the peoples have found, and are still finding, that the key to human happiness is not enshrined in political or economic systems. How often has a magnificent uprising of the spirit lost itself in these sterile wastes! Listen to what de Tocqueville wrote about the spirit of France at the outbreak of the Revolution of 1789: "The magnitude, the beauty, the risks of the endeavour captivated and ravished the imagination of the whole French people. In the presence of this immense design, each individual completely forgot himself." Though reforms caused individual sufferings, though the lives of thousands were disjointed, though uncertainty of the future interfered with trade and industry, "all these private calamities disappeared, in the eyes even of those who suffered by them, in the splendour of the common enterprise. The love of well-being, which was one day to reign supreme over all other passions, was then but a subordinate and feeble predilection. Men aimed at loftier pleasures. Every man was resolved, in his heart, to sacrifice himself for so great a cause, and to grudge neither his time nor his property, nor his life." And then de Tocqueville adds: "The illusion lasted but a moment." Such is the way with political revolutions. But the spirit of the Church Militant is not an illusion. It is a spirit that has kept the Christian banner flying as the rallying point of Western Civilisation for two thousand years. It converted the Roman Empire, it kept learning alive through the Dark Ages, it inspired the Crusades and Chivalry, it formed the framework of mediaeval Society, it has provided a connecting link between the national States of modern times; it will, I believe, be the agency of a new unity, a unity against which some perverse instincts of human nature seem again and again to turn us, but towards which we are surely moving.

The other day I read a notice commemorating the eight hundredth anniversary of the death of Peter Abelard in 1143. It recalled how for many previous centuries "the lands of the ancient civilisation" had been trampled by "the barbarians from beyond the Rhine and the infidels from the East"—just as they are to-day. Then, in Abelard's lifetime, it became clear that "the long defensive warfare of Christendom was finished, and the gates of Hell had not prevailed. At last the forces of the Cross were going forward to the attack. And with that tremendous raising of the siege of Christendom went the great intellectual release. The surging impulse of the Twelfth Century Renaissance is unique in history."

I wonder whether any future historian will be able to say that of the Twentieth Century? Why not? It depends on you and me. It may depend quite appreciably on what we make of this Conference, which I now have much pleasure in declaring open.

