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978-0-521-14249-6 - The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century

Ben Knights

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BEN KNIGHTS

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Beside the humanity that the poet succinctly depicts as ‘Minds turned to the world and heedless of the heavens’ it was possible until the last half-century, to discern another, essentially distinct, which (up to a point) acted as a brake on the first. I mean that class of men whom I shall call the *clerics*, gathering under that title those whose activity does not in its essence aim at practical goals, and who, finding their satisfaction in the practice of art, of science or of metaphysics (in short in the possession of unworldly wealth), announce in one way or another, ‘My kingdom is not of this world’. In fact over the two thousand years up to our time I see an uninterrupted procession of philosophers, of divines, of writers, of artists, of scientists (one might include nearly all such practitioners of the period) whose tendency constitutes a formal opposition to the realism of the masses. Take the specific case of political passions: the *clerics* oppose them in two ways. In one, totally free from these passions themselves, they give (like a da Vinci, a Malebranche or a Goethe) an example of devotion to a completely disinterested spiritual activity, and foster belief in the supreme value of that form of existence. In another, as moralists themselves and based on the conflict of human egoism, they inculcate (like an Erasmus, a Kant or a Renan) the adoption in the name of humanity and justice of an abstract principle superior to and directly opposed to those passions. Doubtless – and even though they founded the modern state to the degree that it is superior to individual selfishness – the action of these *clerics* remained above all theoretical. They did not prevent hatreds and slaughter on the part of the laity. But they did prevent the people at large from making a religion out of its aspirations, from thinking itself important in attempting to realise them. One can say that, thanks to them, humanity has for two thousand years performed evil but honoured goodness. That paradox is the glory of the human race, and the crack through which civilisation was able to slip.

Julien Benda, *La Trahison des clerics*

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive.

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viii

*The idea of the clerisy*

And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country,  
placing it under its mental deity;

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of, &  
enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental  
deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood;

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had order'd such  
things.

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.

Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'

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## PREFACE

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The writing of this book fell into several phases, and incurred more debts than I can or should briefly acknowledge. Even to speak of debts creates the misleading impression of discrete and measurable additions to one's personal stock. But some acknowledgements demand to be made. The project first took shape under the stimulus and with the encouragement of Professor Raymond Williams, and continued under the guidance of my research supervisor, Professor Graham Hough. Many of my fellow graduate students deserve thanks for their vivid contributions to the period of continuing education out of which the original version grew. I would name especially Dr John Carroll and Dr Heather Glen. In its later phases, the book fed upon the conversation or advice of Cambridge colleagues – Dr John Barrell, Dr Jonathan Culler, Dr Leslie Hill, Mr Raymond O'Malley, Dr Wilbur Sanders – and students. Many of them helped far more than they themselves perhaps realise. Finally, a book which asks for a reassessment of the transactions between intellectual enterprise and practical living owes most to non-specialists: to those who by their companionship and example radically enlarged the experience behind the text. My especial thanks go to Janet, my wife; to Lionel and Elizabeth Knights, my parents; and to John Myer, who generously opened up to me the world of primary education.

Unfortunately, John Colmer's edition of Coleridge's *On the Constitution of the Church and State* was published too late for me to use. For all defects of scholarship and presentation I in my impatience am alone responsible.

BEN KNIGHTS

*Durham**July 1977*