

CHAPTER I

CHRISTIANITY AND THE
GREAT DEBATE

THE subject which I wish to discuss is the relationship of 'Christian principles'—whatever these may be—to the great debate about forms of government which goes on without ceasing in the world at large. That is an issue of some importance for Christians, since in these matters an appeal to the sanctions of Christianity by contestants of sharply divergent opinions is inevitable, and natural. It may be legitimate; but the possibilities of mistake, and fraud, are so great that it is necessary for Christians to consider when, and with what results, their religion is rightly involved, and when it is not. It would, however, be impossible to consider this issue without propounding questions that concern everyone, whether he is a Christian or a non-Christian, whether he is interested in the claims made on the behalf of Christianity or profoundly indifferent to them; for they are questions to which any man or woman may be forced at some time to find some sort of answer, and an answer that might have to serve as a guide for conduct, an answer which in conceivable circumstances they might have to back with their life. I would like to suggest, therefore, that it would be as well for anyone to consider some of these matters calmly and systematically in the abstract before they can confront him confusedly and violently in the concrete.

For what is the great debate? It is concerned both with

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questions of expediency and of absolute right. What is debated is not only what is the best and most efficient form of government, but what ends the State should serve, what form of government will best serve those ends, what rights the State possesses, what obligations rest upon the subjects of the State, and what are the limits of those obligations. It has in fact gone on continuously since human beings have been conscious of the way in which the communities in which they lived are organized. Sometimes it has meant the systematic comparison of constitutions and social structures; sometimes it has meant the mere rehearsal of deep-seated prejudices, with a cheer for this and a groan for that, to be answered by comparable noises from the other side, though in different places. Sometimes it has been flatly utilitarian, the simple comparison of different methods by which efficiency may be secured, and sometimes it has brought into question problems of the profoundest philosophical importance; indeed, it has often done this, for there is no system of ethics, however private and unworldly, which does not at some point have to consider the public obligations of the citizen.

For this reason, since Christianity came to be a force to be reckoned with, men engaged in it have very often appealed to what they have asserted are Christian principles to endorse their point of view; but since the issues have never been solely academic, they have also frequently appealed to force, either to armed force in war or to the gallows and the firing-squad where they could use those arguments on their opponents. But whatever its nature, the debate has always gone on, since man was advanced enough to think about these matters, and I think always

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will go on. A great deal of breath has been expended on it, much ink, and I am afraid not a little blood, but it will not come to a conclusion until human beings become completely content with their own condition and their neighbours' methods, a state of affairs which there seems to be no great reason to expect.

It has from time to time changed the vocabulary it uses and to some extent its subject-matter, and in the last thirty years its issues have come to seem to turn primarily on the difference between two apparently contrasting systems of government as severally practised in two groups of states into which the governments of the most advanced countries of the world have been very roughly distributed. Before the war these were normally called the democracies and the dictatorships, or in terms which I would prefer because I think they raise deeper problems, the democracies and the totalitarian States. The exigencies of war broke into this alignment since it brought about the alliance of Russia with the Western democracies, and a period of rather confused nomenclature developed, when that hard-pressed maid-of-all-work, the word 'democracy', was stretched to include any form of government in any country that was prepared to fight Germany or Japan. That confusion was, however, the result of the urgency of outward circumstances, and had little to do with systematic thought. When peace came in 1945, a new and much clearer alignment took place, along the line of the iron curtain. The debate was now between the democracies and the communist powers. The communist powers confused matters by using the term democracy for their forms of government; they called them

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'people's democracies'. To Western publicists this was an abuse of the word, but possibly it made necessary a closer definition of the governments in the free world. Certainly it was claimed that the governments in the non-communist world were not only 'democracies', but that they embodied 'Western European' or 'liberal' traditions, or alternatively 'the Christian tradition'. This was of course not the first time that appeal had been made to the Christian tradition; it had been evoked in the struggle with Hitler. In that struggle there was good reason for such an appeal; there is possibly equally good reason for an appeal to Christianity in the struggle with communism; yet the use of the 'Christian tradition' and the 'liberal tradition' as alternative terms does present problems which I wish to discuss.

Nevertheless, in the period between 1945 and 1955, whatever difficulties the problems of nomenclature and this troublesome word 'democracy' may have offered, men engaged in the debate had little difficulty in making clear to what systems they were referring; after all, the governments of the world were divided by a sharply defined diplomatic frontier across which there was endless vituperation, the unceasing threat of war and on occasion actual armed aggression. There may be reason to hope that a more peaceful period is about to begin. However, if this is so, there may be a slurring of differences which will have its own dangers; for what is in question in the great debate is an ideological rather than a diplomatic frontier; not what states are aligned against each other, but two sharply contrasted views of the principles to be observed in the government of man.

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For this reason, indeed on all counts, it is peculiarly necessary to define clearly what are the basic two principles of the parties to the debate as it now stands. The best names to give them are, probably, the 'liberal democracies' and the 'communist totalitarian States'. Nor is it difficult to enumerate which States come into either group: France, Belgium, Holland, the United States, Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries are among the liberal democracies, while Communist Russia and its satellites and Communist China are communist totalitarian States. However, in this terminology probably the most difficult, and probably the most important, words are 'liberal' and 'totalitarian', so the analysis must be pressed further and the word totalitarian so defined as to include Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy: States which were totalitarian without being communist.

Nowadays, I believe, a good many people hold that the principle of self-determination is the most appropriate touchstone with which to try governments; consequently it may seem that the best test of a liberal democracy is that it should possess representative government based on recurrent free elections protected by the secret ballot for the voters and all the other arrangements which have been designed to secure free discussion and choice. Only so, it will be said, is it certain that the will of the majority of the people is effectively and continuously expressed in the government of the State. There are, however, difficulties in using free elections by themselves as the test for a liberal State, or in relying too confidently on the principle of majority rule. Freedom of election is after all only one among many institutions which are designed to protect

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liberty in a liberal state; and the liberty which is to be secured, the rights which such institutions are designed to guarantee, must at times be those of groups and individuals who have not the remotest chance of ever securing a majority which is even sympathetic to them. Besides, in many countries, it is not always clear beyond a peradventure that the clumsy compromising methods of free election and parliamentary rule will in fact be those which most certainly ensure that the will of the majority will prevail; there are circumstances when it seems very probable that the will of the majority is most effectively put into force by a dictatorship. This is unfortunate, but the fact that we dislike the result does not destroy its validity. Indeed, it is hard to escape the belief that the government of Hitler in 1936 expressed the will of the majority of the German people at that moment more truly and decisively than could have been done by the manoeuvres and compromises of any number of parliamentary politicians returned by a series of free but indecisive general elections. To discover, therefore, the essential differences of principle between the two groups of states it is necessary to look more closely at their characteristic institutions.

The basic principle in a liberal democracy is probably the rule of law, the principle that a human being ought as far as possible to live his life subject to a known law. This law ought to have been recognized from antiquity or passed by constitutional means before it is invoked in an individual case. It should pay respect to the inherent rights of men and women as men and women, and to those mysterious principles which are difficult to define

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but more easy to recognize, the principles of justice. It must as far as possible be enforced by men who are not under the control of the power which directs the policy of the State, but who will take account only of the facts before them and of rules which are the same for all similar cases, and who will therefore not be swayed in any particular case by the administrative needs of the moment. For the object of the rule of law is to secure, as far as is possible, that men shall not live their lives at discretion, permitted or forbidden to do things, left at liberty or incarcerated, granted life or condemned to die, as suits the changing policy of the executive authority.

The rule of law is the substratum of all liberal society, for without it no individual right can be securely enjoyed. However, in all liberal societies men must enjoy, within reason, certain essential rights which the law must as far as is practicable secure. There must, for instance, be freedom of opinion, as far as that can be a reality; men must not be punished or handicapped for holding particular opinions, though they may be prevented from acting on their opinions if that will endanger the State. There must be freedom of access to information, opportunities for parents to educate their children in their beliefs, if that can be arranged; there must be freedom of utterance, subject, of course, to the rights of other persons not to be defamed, to the needs of public security and the public peace. There should be reasonable freedom of action, subject again, of course, to respect for the rights of others and public security. There should also be freedom of association, though not for such actions as might endanger the ordinary well-being of other members of the

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community. These and other liberties the laws and institutions of the liberal State must endeavour to secure, as far as such liberties can be secured by institutions and laws.

Such laws and institutions will not be needed, much less will they have any sacrosanct authority, in the totalitarian State. For such a state will undertake, or will reserve the right to undertake, to decide how a man is to vote, think, speak, educate his children and act. In the totalitarian State the subject can have no rights against the State; that statement, however, points to a difficulty. In a liberal democracy also the subject can have no rights against the State. In domestic matters at least, a liberal democracy must be, if it is to survive as an organized community, a sovereign State in which a law constitutionally passed and properly enforced must take effect, however unjust or intolerable it may seem to the individual. The common order, if it is to continue, may not be at the mercy of eccentric opinion or the vagaries of the particular conscience, while the battery of provisos, modifications and limitations which have to be recorded with any statement of any important public liberty establish the fact that no orderly community could continue to exist which allowed its subjects untrammelled liberty in any direction whatsoever. Neither in potential power, nor altogether in the use of power, can the liberal State differ absolutely from the totalitarian State.

Where the totalitarian State and the liberal State ought to differ absolutely is in intention. In the liberal democracies the intention ought to be to respect individual rights as far as possible, and it ought to be the object of the State so to organize matters that private men and

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women can make as many of their choices as is possible for themselves. The totalitarian State will have no such intention. It will desire as far as it can to make its subjects' choices for them, and, when a State is equipped with all the power that modern technique has provided for governments, that is very far indeed. Nor will a totalitarian State have any intention of respecting the rights of its subjects, for it will not believe that its subjects could have any rights which it would desire to respect, certainly no right to freedom of choice in any matter in which the State is interested.

This denial of individual right may be justified in a variety of ways. The rulers of the State may perhaps regard their subjects, or large groups of their subjects, as being less than human, and therefore as possessing no human rights; in Nazi Germany, for instance, a Polish labourer had no more rights than a cow or a pig, because a Pole was less than a human being. Or certain classes of the community may be regarded as inherently criminal and therefore as having forfeited human rights, as members of the old 'exploiting' classes have been at times considered to be outside the law in communist States. As a matter of fact a simpler and more universal justification for this denial of rights is available nowadays. It may be held that science has plainly established the fact that not even human beings have any power of free decision, and that, since science has also demolished the possibility that any source of transcendental right can exist, there really can be nothing to bother about. This, however, is rather too sweeping a hypothesis to be advanced openly, and the most common general justification for totalitarianism

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derives from the belief, often enough sincerely held, that all that is worth while for the human beings who are the subjects of a totalitarian State is in fact summed up in the purposes of that State. There is no need, therefore, to respect any individual intention which does not correspond with those purposes, no need to reserve from the control of the State any sphere of private decision out of respect for the personality of the subject. The State's demands on the subject may be total because it represents the totality of all that is valuable for mankind.

To be effective, however, such a belief must be based on an absolute certainty that the State does possess this monopoly of value. Any lingering belief that there exist any values of equal importance outside the operations of the State which the rulers of the State ought to consider in framing their demands on their subjects would limit the State's totality. Such certainty has, however, not proved hard to achieve, and were it questioned certain arguments could be used. It could be asserted, for instance, that the demands of the State were based on the clear findings of science, and that they represented the manifest needs of humanity at the present stage. Or it might be asserted by another type of ruler that they plainly represented the clearly revealed will of God.

All this, however, raises another and most important problem. If the theory of the totalitarian State is based upon certainty about essential values, is the theory of the liberal State necessarily based upon uncertainty, or accepted disagreement about them? Must one say that the liberal State does not intend to impose one view of truth, or one line of conduct, either because its members