

THE LAST BEST HOPE

*Insurance Against
Holocaust*

by C. Stanley Lowell



The Last, Best Hope

In New York City there recently gathered, under the auspices of the Fund for the Republic, a group of prominent clergymen and laymen representing the major faiths. They were to discuss "The Role of Religion in a Free Society." The discussion continued for four days. At the end of that period these leaders discovered that they had spent the entire time doing one thing only. Their curious denouement was described by Dr. Norman St. John-Stevas of Yale, in the following words:

The last four days have been largely a critique of the Roman Catholic Church. I think this is most welcome; it confirms my continual experience since I have been here in private conversation with Americans. The Catholic problem is an existential problem; it exists in the people's mind. This conference gives to American Catholics a solemn warning that whoever is responsible, the image of the Catholic Church which has been created in the American mind is not an image of the Church of Christ. It is largely an image of a power structure. Bricks are not made without straw and a part of this responsibility, a heavy part, rests with Catholics themselves.

This problem which St. John-Stevas so eloquently propounds is one which far transcends the immediate object and the immediate context of his remarks. While the problem is something of a new problem in the United States, it is actually a very old problem. It is a problem which is concerned not only with the Roman version of Christianity in the middle years of the 20th Century, but with the whole institutional bent and structure of organized religion. In any realistic

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analysis of the relation between church and state we are confronted with this towering fact — that when the church ceases to take on itself the form of a servant, and assumes, instead, the shape of a power structure, it begins to be a problem and even a threat to the culture in which it exists.

Anti-Clerical Spain

A high official of the Roman Catholic Church created a sensation a couple of years ago with the remark that if police protection were to be withdrawn in Spain the life of every cleric would be in danger. This is an amazing statement. Why should such a thing be? If police protection were withdrawn in the U. S., would the people immediately begin to demolish the churches and kill the preachers? The notion is bizarre and grotesque. Yet, here is an undoubted authority assuring us that this very thing would take place in Spain. Why? Is it because the Spanish people are vicious? Are they instinctive killers who will malevolently attack a defenseless group? Of course not. There are reasons — or at least motivations — for such behavior. The underlying cause may be defined as that excessive measure of popular disillusion which sets in when the church forsakes its creative role and becomes merely a power apparatus.

Society's institutions exist for service. The church is not an exception; it exists for the highest form of service we know. Institutions are needed; therefore they take shape. We know that institutions may continue a vestigial existence long after their day of service has passed; yet we know, too, that decay and death are certain. They must create or die. You remember the vivid figure Christ used

in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men." This is a spectacle which the forces of history have disclosed to us time upon time upon time.

Christ was speaking to His followers. Despite this fact there are those who suppose that His words do not apply to the church. Of course they do apply, with a peculiar and devastating relevance. What is the criterion of it? How can we tell when the church has ceased to serve and is approaching the danger point in popular tolerance? The sure mark of atrophy is over-acquisitiveness. It happens when the energies of the church are no longer devoted to the missionary and evangelistic task but are bent, instead, on acquiring wealth and building up temporal power. Of political parties, of labor unions, of giant corporations, of ruling classes — we know this to be true. Let us recognize, further, that the church is conspicuously susceptible to the temptations of esurience.

Churches and Wealth

Consider the matter of wealth. Old soldiers, we are told, do not die — they only fade away. The church does neither. If the church acquires something — a tract of land, let us say — it keeps it. Individuals die and there is redistribution. But not the church. It keeps what it has across the span of generations. It keeps what it has and acquires more. There is a burgeoning of possessions. Unless this process is checked or somehow interrupted, the time may eventually come in the history of an old and perhaps a small nation when the church has

it all and the people have nothing. What is the trouble in Spain? Why do the people hate the church to the point where they would destroy its edifices and kill its clerics? Because, says Herbert Matthews, the *New York Times* correspondent, in his book on Spain, the church is too rich. Through the ceaseless flow of subsidies, grants of tax-free land, grants for church construction, grants for church schools, grants for maintenance of churches and rectories, stipends for the clergy, grants for education, for censorship service, for welfare services — grants, grants ad infinitum — through all this the church has become rich beyond the humble realities of the country. This condition Matthews describes as "religious inflation." He says: "The Spanish Church has been given a position, a power, a wealth beyond the modest treasures of material goods and humble faith that the country possesses."

So — that is why the people don't like it: the church has it all and they have nothing. We see this grim process at various stages of its unfolding in Italy where the church is fabulously wealthy, in Portugal and Quebec and the Latin countries, in Poland where much of the strife between church and state at this moment is due to the church's efforts to regain land which was expropriated and redistributed among the peasants. Along with state financing of the church there has been state sponsorship of the Roman version of Christianity with the result that the evangelical witness is discouraged and evangelicals themselves often oppressed.

Within the last three months, three well-known and respected Baptist churches in Spain have been closed by police action. Why were these churches

closed? Because too many people were being converted. This is something the Spanish clerics are not going to permit if they can help it. We should not be surprised at this: it is the kind of activity which always seems to accompany state sponsorship of an official church.

Insurance Against Holocaust

Winston Churchill in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* demonstrates that one of the major causes of the French Revolution was the fact that the church had acquired too much real estate, and that the clergy were leaders in exactions from the people. "In the resulting holocaust," he writes, "thousands of priests were killed by the outraged people." In England — we know the story there — things built up to the point where something had to give and something did give.

In long-suffering Mexico which finally rose up in wrath against the church, to this day the clergy are not permitted to appear on the streets clad in clerical garb. Resentment mounted to such a pitch that the people decided they did not even want to look at the clergy.

And now there are portents of it here. It is only beginning but we can discern the trend. We see it in New Jersey, in Rhode Island, in Massachusetts, in New York. We see one of the most valuable sites in Manhattan turned over at a give-away price to the Roman Catholic Church to own and hold tax-free in perpetuity for its operations. The give-away of public properties to the church is on and the spigot of public subsidies to church operations has begun to flow. Across the generations the cumulative process moves with increasing speed

toward its tragic finale. Who is to blame? The church itself, the church that will not learn from history, the church which again and again has stepped out of its serving role and in wealth and arrogance has assumed the status of a power structure.

What will be the outcome so far as the church is concerned? We know the answer. It is more than coincidence; it is as unshakable as Boyle's Law — that the church's spiritual decline commences from the moment it chooses to subsist on the exactions of the state. As its tax wealth accumulates, its spirit decays. Are we confronted here with a Spenglerian cycle? Is this an inexorable gambit — first a creative epoch of evangelistic outreach, then an alliance with the state; then material prosperity; then obsession with temporal power and glory; then spiritual senility and decay; and, finally, an awful day of reckoning?

There is one strong defense against this deadly cycle, one strong defense against the finale of anti-clericalism. This is the principle of voluntarism. How can a man get mad at a church which he freely joins and can freely leave at any time? How can others get mad when they are free to have nothing whatever to do with the church? If a man thinks the church is too rich, he doesn't have to start a revolution; all he has to do is to stop giving. Indeed, there are people in our pews who keep applying that kind of therapy all the time! How can the church get too rich when its whole financial basis is voluntary? It can't: *voluntarism is insurance against holocaust*. Says Herbert Matthews in *The Yoke and the Arrows*: "We have no reason whatever to be (anti-clerical) in countries where there is separation of church and state, freedom of worship,

free education, and where the economic status of the churches is commensurate with their needs and their roles in society."

Public Money for Churches

I have said the church is to blame; the government is to blame, also. For the Federal government today seems determined to force its money on many enterprises which were once private and personal in character. Perhaps the church cannot escape engulfment in this vortex. Some years ago, for example, Congress passed legislation providing Federal aid for church hospitals. The money was there; all the churches had to do was take it. They did take it. One church gained a special mastery of the art of obtaining these funds. Across the Southland the Roman Catholic Church began to erect handsome centers of healing and religious propaganda. The church itself invested little or nothing in these centers. It would raise half the money locally for a "community" hospital and then get the other half from the Federal government. These Roman Catholic centers were often erected in communities where that church had previously had no following. The church and the school and the parish soon followed the hospital and this denomination was in business.

The Baptists refused the government money in practically every case. Rather belatedly, perhaps, they sought a change in the formula — that *loans*, rather than *grants*, be made available to churches. After solemn debate, and with a show of making a great concession to the Baptists, the Congress made the loans *alternative* to the gifts. So now, they will give you

the money — or, if you are going to be stubborn and remain behind the times, you can borrow it and pay it back! There it is. You can wedge your hands tightly into your pockets and run determinedly away, just as Bunyan ran from the City of Destruction, but they will catch up with you and make you take it anyway! There is a disposition among many, alas, to give up without running. Some are even running the other way.

I grant the initial plausibility of it. The state thinks it can ensure its own survival by buying morality and paying the bill. The churches reason this way: What could God do if He had the money! So let us get it for Him and by the surest and easiest way — from the government. Let us take out of church finance all the grind and danger. Let there be surcease from the moil of fund raising. Let us discover in the vaults at Fort Knox a Shangri-La for harassed churchmen. Let us buy with the state's money what cannot be won by spiritual contagion.

There is another complicating factor — the competitiveness which sets in. One church sees another church getting all the gravy. It sees another church getting all puffed up with government money into a powerful socio-political institution. It envies the other church. It wants to get puffed up, too. No one seems to inquire whether this is the will of God. No one recalls John's burning words to the church at Laodicea: "You say, I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing. I tell you that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked." Here we encounter that insidious blindness with which wealth afflicts both men and churches. Because others are corrupted we insist that we must be corrupted, too.

What is the meaning of it all? Why this is the same old cycle. We shall put

it in slightly different terms at this point, but it is the same old cycle. The church "goes social." It takes over social functions, one after another, some of them bearing little or no relevance to its assignment from the Lord. In order to sustain such a program the church must have subsidies from tax funds. The subsidies mount as the operations become big business. Subsidies clothe the church with political power and social distinction. More and more attention has to be given to getting more and more until at last, cumbered with many things, the church is carried as an ornate burden on a spangled litter by those it was destined to save and serve.

"How long, O Lord, how long?" How long will it be before the United States, which so diligently sought to safeguard against that very debacle, may find itself saddled with an oppressive church? And how long will it be, then, before an outraged populace turns against it?

Churchmen, Beware!

The temptation to wealth and prestige is ultra-peculiar to strong churches. The Roman Church has succumbed to its wiles again and again. But now we approach a curious juncture where this temptation becomes the temptation of Baptists. For you, too, are strong. You may well be the nation's strongest church, and I do not except the Roman Church. You represent the unregimented power of free congregations, and this is the strongest kind of power there is on earth. This power is not comforting. It is awkward; it is foreboding. This is the most dangerous stage of a church's development. I could almost wish for your sake that you had not come hither. But you are

here and there is no going back. Such power has an affinity for other power. It can easily turn state-ward rather than God-ward, seeking not the offense of the cross, but the guerdon of social prestige. It can become a power structure, no longer serving, but served. In a few blind decades it can lose all.

Re-think, will you not? Re-think! Ask yourselves scathingly what a church is, what a church is for, what are the church's proper functions as Christ our Lord envisaged them. Is it the things you have been discussing here — evangelism, missions, winning and care of souls, worship? Or is it some other things. Remember this—One sure way to sink the boat is to take on more cargo than it can carry.

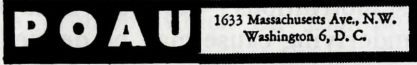
Let us ask ourselves, also, who are the friends of Christ. Are they those who promote this deadly cycle? Are they those who spend sleepless nights plotting ways by which laws can be circumvented and constitutional provisions nullified in order to provide tax money for the church? Or, are Christ's friends those who stoutly resist the whole trend and fight the subsidy as they would any other deadly foe? The church-state money barrier must be held. We must keep it where it is, push it back if we can. Baptists must take the lead in communicating to their fellow Christians and to the entire world the meaning of the American way in church and state which they originated.

Some of the figures we have used may be unfortunate. We are not Canute haughtily bidding the ocean tide to come no farther. We are Christian men with civil rights that are tools for the building of a great, free society. More than a century ago our fathers used these tools

to build the spiritual ramparts where now we dwell. They rejected that old, discredited pattern with the state taking forced collections for the church and enforcing an official orthodoxy upon everybody. They threw that out and built something fine and new, namely the free and voluntary tradition of the American churches. At this stage we do not have to revert. We do not have to take on ourselves now the noxious burden which our fathers rejected then. We can, by God's grace, go on as they began. On their sure foundation we can build the ramparts yet stronger and higher, all the while keeping our churches free of the state's oppression and our state free of the curse of clericalism. We need not wretchedly lose but can proudly keep this, the last, best hope of earth.

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