

CHAPTER III.THE PRESS AND THE PULPIT.

The Church has nothing to fear from the Press. This has not always been the case for the traditional resentment by the Church of criticism was incompatible with the relentless searchlight of enquiry and publicity which the Press flashes in all directions, respecting neither class nor rank, profession nor position. With the altered spirit with which the Twentieth Century has found the Church imbued, however, the antagonism of the past has become mellowed with age and the leaders of ecclesiastical thought have begun to realise that, just as they themselves are not wholly good, so the Press is not wholly bad. Progress is made by the subjection of existing practices and traditions to a careful analysis, the rejection of what is found to be unwholesome, and the preservation of those qualities which still meet with approval. This is an age of enlightened religion.

As far as the Church is concerned, it has few functionaries within its own walls capable of performing this extremely delicate task of self-criticism impartially and without prejudice. Any such attempted analysis would be accomplished "through Church-coloured glasses". This being so, it is necessary, if the Church is to march with the times and keep itself acquainted with the people's reasonable requirements in the spiritual world, for it has not only to be alive to its defects but to put its house in order. The part which the Press has played in drawing attention to the

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attitude of the Church towards the community as a whole is not inconsiderable. In countries where the Roman Catholic Church is strongly organised and is able to support its own Press, adverse criticism from a non-Catholic Press is not tolerated. In a free and progressive country like South Africa, however, freedom to criticise fairly is not denied.

That no unfriendly feeling towards the Church animates the Press is evident from the fact that most Editors throw open their columns, free of charge, to all notices of forthcoming services of Church meetings, special columns being set aside each Friday afternoon or Saturday morning for this purpose. The Ministers of Religion are not slow to realise the value of this free publicity and these columns are invariably filled. Sermons, too, are frequently reported, provided the reporter is able to find some topical reference on to which to base the sermon, for it is common cause that the man-in-the-street does not wish to have a dull reproduction in print of a sermon which was not sufficiently attractive when advertised to draw him to the Church to hear it from the pulpit. The "Sunday Times", and the "Rand Daily Mail", and other newspapers publish weekly sermons which are specially written by selected writers, and the appreciative letters which have been received by the Editors of the papers concerned are proof positive of the fact that those sermons get to the hearts of persons who are untouched by the sermons preached from the Pulpit because they do not go to Church to hear them. This practice of publishing sermons is also followed by the Afrikaans Press.

The London "Daily Express" published a series of articles during 1931 dealing with the experiences of a
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youth in one of the English penal institutions. His opening sentence in his article on "Religion in Prison" read as follows :

"During the past few weeks the 'Daily Express' has filled the Chapel of the Prison every Sunday afternoon.

The article continued in such an illuminating manner that it seems advisable to quote it fairly fully. It clearly demonstrated that the Press is one of the most powerful allies the Pulpit can hope to have. It gets its message across to tens of millions, while the Church caters for the spiritual needs of millions. The article continued :

"Some months ago the Church Army official at the prison, and one of the best-loved Christian workers in the British prison service, conducted an experiment one Sunday of reading one of the famous "My Religion" articles from the "Daily Express" instead of delivering a stereotyped sermon.

During the following week hundreds of men sent for him and appealed to him to read more of these articles.

He consulted the prison chaplain, who agreed that these articles, judging from the intense interest which had been aroused among the prisoners by the first, supplied a long-felt want.

Thus it came about that the articles by famous people on "My Religion" and "How I Look at Life" have been the means of filling the prison's chapel to the doors every Sunday afternoon for months.

If no one else in the whole of England read those articles, the writers can be assured that they have brought joy and new hope to hundreds of men who thought they had been forgotten in the world.

An indication of the broadmindedness of this official is provided by the fact that on recent Sundays he has read the conflicting articles on "Why I Became a Catholic" by Eveyln Waugh, and its sequel on "Why I Am a Protestant" by E. Rosslyn Mitchell."

"The Churchman", a well-known organ of Anglican opinion in this country published in January, 1931, an article dealing with the question of the teaching of the truths of religion in other ways than the conventional method of

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preaching from the pulpit. This article suggested that journalism had shown a re-awakened interest in religion, and pointed to works of a definitely religious nature by Dean Inge, the late Studdart Kennedy, and the Dean of Canterbury, which had been listed among the best sellers of the season. The attitude of "The Churchman" towards the Press is best summed up in its own words :

"Although from time to time The Churchman has had tilts at one or other of the daily newspapers (from which, however, they seem to recover with disconcerting rapidity) it is glad of an opportunity, of paying its humble tribute not only of admiration for the extraordinarily efficient organisation, but to the general qualities of honesty and fairness with which the journalism of our day is conducted".

"The Churchman" drew attention to the fact that has already been mentioned, that newspapers willingly devote a full column of their precious space each week to a sermon, and added :

"Some think it is vulgarising the Faith. So it is. And so it should be, if you recall the exact meaning of the term "vulgar". It is actually enjoined upon the clergy that the faith shall be taught in the "vulgar" tongue. One of the greatest mistakes made by Church papers is that they will persist in publishing articles which, while they may interest the parson, leave the layman stone cold. The great majority of the church papers are merely trade journals for the clergy".

The article further suggested that what was wanted was an "Ecclesiastical John Bull", and remarked that the "Christian Science Monitor" was often held up as the best example of religious propaganda through newspaper

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178. Reproduced in full in the "Natal Witness", January 23rd, 1931 under the headlines, "Teaching Religion in Newspapers", "The Churchman praises modern Journalism".
179. Speaking at a Missionary meeting at Chiltorne Domer, Dorset, the Rev. C.T. Warren outlined the value of what is called "Newspaper Evangelism" and the phenomenal success which had attended this way of spreading the Word of God" - "Western Gazette", August 26th, 1932.

avenues. But that paper, it added was heavily subsidized, and the Church of Christ Scientist was a corporation well able to bear the expense. The natural result of the publication of this paper was that people who would ordinarily have had no interest in Christian Science were becoming acquainted with its teachings. The article continued with the further observation: "Religion to-day is in the news, and well it deserves to be, for it is the very essence of Christianity that it should supply the leaven which leavens the whole lump of our domestic, civil, and political life".

The article has been quoted in extenso because it is one of the most instructive that has been traced by the writer, so far as the relations between the Press and the Pulpit are concerned. A claim made earlier in this work that the Press is the most powerful force in the world to-day was partly borne out by the Rev. Glyndwr Davies, of Pretoria, ¹⁸⁰ who declared from the pulpit that "There are five powerful factors that play upon the mind of modern life; the Press, fiction, wireless, the drama, and the films". The fact of the Press having been placed first in this category leads the writer to infer that the speaker regarded it as the most powerful of the five factors mentioned. Mr. Davies did not enlarge upon ecclesiastical--Press relations on that occasion because his topic was the subject of "good and bad films". The underlying sympathy which the Church has for the Press and a tacit acknowledgment by the former of the power of the latter is also borne out in the following sentence occurring in a pamphlet issued in the Diocese of Leicester during a Week of Prayer held during February, 1932. The prayer
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180. "Pretoria News", March 22nd, 1931.

reads: "That the Press may realise its grave responsibilities towards these and other national evils", the evil referred to being a State lottery.

Church Leaders are naturally devout observers of the rule of Sunday observance, and a piquant position arose in Pretoria two years ago when the "Pretoria News" asked "If newspaper men insist on having their day of rest as well as other people, who is going to report the sermons in favour of Sunday observance?". Similarly in Johannesburg four years ago, the Dean, the Very Rev. W.A. Palmer, rang up the "Rand Daily Mail" asking for a reporter to attend the Good Friday service as he intended making some outspoken comment on the hard-heartedness of the Municipality in making road-workers continue their labours on that sacred holiday!

Some indication has thus far been given of the relationship existing between the Press and the Churches in general. The point which the writer has endeavoured to make is that the relationship is a friendly one, that a spirit of co-operation exists, and that the Press is a powerful ally of the Church in spreading the Gospel. This is not a primary object, however. The Press is out to get the news, in whatever form it may take. Thus, when Mr. T. Gordon Ellis, a well-known Pretoria Architect resigned his position as Churchwarden of Christ Church, Arcadia, and his membership from that Church, the Press made this a hinge on which to hang a long story of dissatisfaction with and dissent from the High Church tendencies practiced in the Church of the Province of South Africa as instanced in the wearing of vestments and the insistence upon the importance of the confessional. When, two years later, a branch of the Church of England, as opposed to the

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Church of the Province, was established in the Capital, this was made the occasion for the recapitulation for the whole of the inner story of the resignation. This rankled certain Church dignitaries in Pretoria but they were powerless to prevent events taking their course, as the source of information of the Pressman concerned was the Church Magazine itself:

publicity in regard to the controversy between the Church of the Province of South Africa and the Church of England is also not desired by the stronger body, although the smaller body went to the length of paying for a half-page advertisement in the "Cape Times" under the heading of "Why Two Churches?" This was stopped by injunction of Court pending litigation on the matter. Explanations "for the private consumption of parishioners and not for general information" were written by the Dean of Pretoria in connection with the dispute, but the outspoken remarks of the Dean proved irresistible and these duly appeared in the daily Press.

Although "Lapses from Grace" are sufficiently numerous to demand a chapter to themselves, the following incident will not be out of place here. It must be remembered, however, that there are always two sides to a question, and that a Bishop must not, merely because he is a Bishop, be given prior sympathy over a journalist. Both may be honourable men, and differences of opinion are legitimate. The Bishop of the Falkland Island made some severe comments on London newspaper methods when he returned to South America.

"He refused interviews to English newspapermen in Buenos Aires on account of his treatment at the hands of a London interviewer, who dismissed in a few lines carefully prepared information on

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181. The Very Rev. Julius Gordon.

182. See Chapter ix .

183. "World's Press News," 1931.

conditions in the Falklands, but dressed with elaborate headlines statements which he never made on the subject of the importance of Falkland wool products to the Bradford industry.

"In future I shall be very chary of what I say to newspaper representatives", said His Lordship.

"My experience in England has shown that one's statements are liable to suffer extraordinary transmutation into nonsense before they get into print".

"In an editorial comment, the Buenos Aires Herald stated :

"A reporter not infrequently finds it necessary to feign polite interest in a mass of non-essentials to obtain one paragraph that will appeal to a hard headed sub-editor.

Information about the Falkland Islands, for instance, is not news. But an indication of the value of Falklands' wool to Bradford might be turned into a bright news story".

On this incident hangs the whole question of "what is news?". The Reporter and the Bishop failed to agree on this point, but, after all, the reporter knows his job and as long as the Bishop was not misrepresented he seems to have no legitimate grouse.

A further clash between Pressmen and a Church dignitary may be mentioned. The Bishop of Pretoria, the Right Rev. N.S. Talbot, asked to express an opinion in connection with the resignation of Mr, Gordon Ellis, replied "I will not be baited. You are trying to stir up a hornet's nest", and rang off. These words were attributed to him the following day and the Bishop immediately disclaimed having used them. The reporter maintained that His Lordship had thus addressed him and added, logically, that he was unlikely to put fictitious words into His Lordship's mouth, knowing full well that the report involved would in all probability be read by the Bishop.

Publicity of a form more welcome to the Church
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was given in the "Sunday Times", where it was stated that :

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184. Referred to above.

185. April 3rd, 1931.

"There were definite signs of a revival in church-going, and the opinion of those best qualified to judge was that this new interest in religion was one result of the difficult times through which we are passing.

"Last Easter Sunday" said the Dean of Johannesburg, the Very Rev. W.A. Palmer, to a "Sunday Times" representative, "we had the largest congregation in St. Mary's Cathedral since the consecration. In the evening people were taking their places an hour and a quarter before the service began. At 7 o'clock-half an hour before-every decent place was occupied. The nave and the galleries were crowded to capacity, and even the chapels had to be used. We had 1,200 service papers printed. These were nothing like enough".

"The Southern Cross", the organ of Roman Catholic Opinion in South Africa, has signed the words of Cardinal Newman, spoken to the Catholic Union of Great Britain, for the ideal of the Catholic Press. "The words might have been addressed to Catholic journalists of the world", the paper stated, and proceeded to quote them as follows :

"They would pray.... for a removal from the public mind of prejudice and ignorance about us; for a better understanding in all quarters of what we hold and what we do not hold; for a feeling of goodwill and respectful bearing in the population towards our bishops and priests; for a growing capacity in the educated classes of entering into a just appreciation of our principles".

The same paper in the course of a series of articles on "Civilisation and Culture" by the Rev. Ernest Hull, S.J. devoted two of these articles to "The Power of
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the Press". In his opening article, Mr. Hull remarked that "The responsibility of the journalist is in one sense far greater than that of a priest. For the priest has his message cut out for him, and has merely to deliver it as received; while the journalist has a free field to choose his own message from, and must choose it, whether for well or ill". Mr Hull stated further that, when approached by

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186. "Southern Cross" November 5th, 1930, and following week.

a preacher for a scheme for a sermon to be preached to a congregation of newspapermen on "The Ethics of Journalism", he replied: "A journalist can legitimately have no other object in life than to spread as much truth and as much goodness as possible to the largest possible number of minds - and to save them from as much untruth and badness as he can. To this all other objects must be subordinated. Amusement, sensationalism, popularity, controversy, party propaganda, circulation, financial success - all these things have a legitimate place in journalism just so far as they are promotive of truth and goodness, or are at least innocent and indifferent, and contain nothing contrary thereto".

"What pathos of impracticability! Mr. Hull exclaimed. "The proposal, I fancy, would strike the average run of secular journalists - the choice and noble-minded few excepted - as almost bizarre in its naiveté. Probably the aim and object which they would recognise as the right one instead would run more or less like this: 'the pursuit of popularity, or influence on public opinion, no matter in what direction it might be'. There are individual exceptions, and a good sprinkling of them; but they do not constitute the rule".

It is added that pages upon pages have been written expatiating the world-wide power of journalism, claiming that the Press is the Gospel, and that journalists are its priesthood.

As already stated, Afrikaans newspapers have thrown open their columns to weekly sermons in order to assist Leaders of the Dutch Reformed Churches in this country to disseminate the Gospel more widely. It is sections of this Church, however, which view the Press with less tolerance and open-mindedness than the other Churches which have been

under consideration. Accordingly, when the Synod of the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk met in Pretoria in 1931 an effort was made to exclude Press representatives from its deliberations. The Rev. J. J. Prinsloo wanted to know whether "that necessary evil", the Press, should be admitted. They had been allowed at previous Synods, he said, but did not always look at matters from the same angle as the Church. He moved that they should not be admitted but that a copy of the minutes should be handed to them at the end of each Session. The Rev. T. Breyer, of Standerton, championed the Press, however, saying that, through their medium, the teachings, aims, and objects of the Church would be made clear to the world. This view was taken by the majority of the elders and "Predikante" present and the Press representatives were allowed to attend the sittings.

Only a month previously, there was a further "incident" in which the Press and the Dutch Reformed Church (the Herv. of Geref. Kerk) were involved. This arose out of the publication before consideration by Synod of a Synodal Commission's report dealing with Mission work among Jews. The report, which contained some startlingly outspoken statements, was handed to the Press at the commencement of the Synod, together with all the other Commissions' reports and other matters which would come before Synod. No request was made that they should not be published in any way before consideration had been given to them and no objection was taken to other reports similarly treated. The nature of this report was so sensational, however, that publication was calculated to do harm, and a vote of censure was passed

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187. According to the "Rand Daily Mail".

on the Pressman concerned.

The whole question of whether or not the Press should be permitted to continue attending the Sessions of Synod was automatically raised, and the debate which followed was illuminating. The Rev. W. Nicol, of Johannesburg, argued that it was surely not the intention of the Synod to sit behind closed doors. The Press reports of the proceedings had generally been favourable, and it would be more appropriate if a vote of appreciation were passed to the Press he stated. The Rev. G. B. A. Cerdener, of Wakkerstroom, also championed the Press, saying that there could be no question of a return to the days of the Inquisition. It was undesirable, he declared, to encroach in any way upon the liberty of the Press. The reports which had been published would stand ¹⁸⁸ the test of publicity. Ultimately the Press was allowed to remain, but was requested not to give too much publicity to the Professor du Plessis case, which came up later for discussion.

There is no intention of analysing in detail the attitude of the multiple denominations in this country in regard to the Press, but it is worthy of note that the Wesleyan Church does not permit the Press to attend its annual Conferences, but appoints a Minister as Press representative to ensure that the local newspapers are given all the "copy" which that Church would desire to see published, and none of that which it does not desire to have published. The Anglican Church, on the other hand, welcomes the Press, not only to its Diocesan Synods, but also to the Bishops' Synod, which was last held in Johannesburg four years ago and which the writer personally attended.

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188. "Rand Daily Mail", April 18th, 1931.

That the power of the printed page in making known the truths of the Written Word is freely acknowledged by the Church is apparent from what precedes, but it becomes still more obvious when it is pointed out that each Parish has its own Magazine to supplement the journal produced by the Diocese each month. This pamphlet— it rarely amounts to more than a pamphlet in this country— contains fixtures of forthcoming services, and meetings, a letter from the Vicar, financial statement of the Church, a list of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, and other items of Church news. It is an effective instrument for the stimulation of interest in matters spiritual and exercises a powerful and beneficial co-ordinating influence over its subscribers. For these reasons, in spite of the cost of production, and the time and trouble involved, the Parish Magazine continues to be an integral part of the duties of the parish priest. In England the magazines are on a rather more ambitious scale, and invariably include a story which serves to "point a moral or adorn a tale". But, whatever the size or nature of the Magazine, its object is the same, and its effectiveness in achieving that object is the justification for its continuance in spite of the counter-acting considerations already outlined.

In order to make this survey of Press and Pulpit relationships as complete as possible, the writer endeavoured to obtain the views on this subject of the Leaders of three different denominational Churches in Johannesburg. Each clergyman was approached independently of the others but all appeared to be unanimous in their views - whatever they may have been - for none of them so much as regretfully

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declined the invitation to enunciate their views, a conspiracy of silence prevailed. This is strange, in view of the fact that the Press, far from being hostile or antagonistic towards the Church, can - and does - assist that body most effectively in its efforts to reach the multitudes and masses with their simple message of Truth.
