

Religion and Politics in the Bellocian Biographies

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In any brief discussion of Hilaire Belloc, the subject matter must be restricted rather severely. This essay will examine just one type of writing, his political works, and a specific genre at that, namely, his biographies. But even this narrowing leaves a large number of actual works. Because of Belloc's ability to present timeless material in a timely manner we will consider a subject of perennial importance, namely, Belloc's views on religion and politics, and, specifically, his opinion of priests in political office.

Belloc wrote three major book-length essays about priests who were of political importance. Two of these men, Thomas Cardinal Wolsey and Armand-Jean Cardinal Richelieu held explicitly governmental posts; indeed, both men were for some time second only to their respective kings in national authority. The third, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, while not a political office-holder, nevertheless had a great political impact in his day. Before turning directly to these three works, we must keep in mind four strong views which animated much, perhaps most, of Belloc's political thought, views concerning the Catholic Church, European unity, democracy, and the monarchy. While one might well disagree with what Belloc has to say on these matters, one cannot understand him without an appreciation of the role which his views on these four subjects played in his work.

The Catholic Church was for Belloc what it is for any Catholic, the divinely founded means to Eternal Salvation. All other things pale in comparison to it, to its health, and to its mission. From this basis, Belloc did not, contrary to some opinion, argue the unimportance of the secular order or of profane institutions. He was, in fact, frequently a staunch supporter of these things. But he did argue

their *relative* unimportance when compared to that of the Church. For this reason that which was dearest to Belloc's heart was European unity, that trans-ethnic unity which predated Charlemagne and survived fairly intact until the time of Luther. For Belloc, this unity was not just a good in itself, but it was also an able means of protecting the Church and of facilitating her work. In considering Belloc's views on democracy and the monarchy, however, we note some incongruity, for Belloc was at once a democrat and a monarchist. A little reflection, though, will clear the confusion.

Belloc was a democrat in that he firmly supported the right of each man to own property and to manage his own affairs as much as possible. His love of local tradition only enhanced his democratic inclination. It goes without saying, of course, that Belloc was a militant anti-socialist, no doubt because socialists are militantly anti-democratic. In light of this pronounced democracy, it might come as some surprise that Belloc wrote with such respect for the monarchy, even while he criticised many individual monarchs. Why this love of the monarchy, and how do we reconcile it with Belloc's concern for democracy?

The monarchy, according to Belloc, presented many advantages. It could provide single and effective leadership in matters concerning the public practice of religion both through official legislation and by personal example. More importantly, for Belloc, the monarchy, was the traditional bulwark protecting the common man—the democrat—against the greed and domination of the rapidly rising wealthy classes. Although the monarchy could, and did, abuse the people, it was more frequently the only power which checked the well-armed and wealthy baron from moving against the individual farmer and peasant. Thus the monarchy could be seen as the guarantor of democracy. When we combine these views about the Church, European unity, democracy, and the monarchy, we find that the single unifying thread of Belloc's political thought seems to be the search for that political system in which men could best save their souls.

In light of this principle, it is clear that Catholic priests, especially priests in political life, would play a great rôle. How they behaved and how they conducted affairs of Church and State could not but be a matter of great interest to Belloc. In his books on

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Wolsey (1930), Cranmer (1931), and Richelieu (1930), Belloc explicitly disclaimed to be writing histories of these men, or even biographies in the strictest sense. Rather he sought to examine *why* these men acted as they did and to discern their characters and motivations. All three men were responsible for acts with which Belloc strongly disagreed. His disappointment in each man was profound. Wolsey's gross mismanagement and abuse of authority as Chancellor under King Henry VIII provided the crucial backdrop for the English schism. As Belloc repeatedly laments, Wolsey watched uncomprehendingly as England was lost to the Church. Cranmer, in turn, through his admittedly magnificent use of the English language, provided Protestant preachers with an invaluable tool, the *Book of Common Prayer*. Without it, suggests Belloc, the English schism would never have caught on with the same depth or rapidity. Richelieu, finally, had and lost the last clear chance to restore a united Europe before the religious division there became, for all human intents, permanent. His efforts to advance France at the expense of her Catholic neighbours closed off any reasonable hope of healing the religious wounds of western Europe.

Yet in his historical essays, Belloc genuinely respected and wrote charitably and truthfully about Wolsey, Cranmer, and Richelieu. Belloc's reputation as a bitterly anti-Protestant writer or as caustic critic of weak Catholics is not borne out here. The point is clearest in *Wolsey*. Belloc is careful to note, for example, that, as nearly as a human being can judge these things, Wolsey reconciled himself to the Church prior to his death. Despite the immeasurable damage which Wolsey did to the Church in England, Belloc credits him with repairing his own relationship with God. That, after all, is what is most important. Belloc, more over, is objective enough to note that Cranmer did not seek any position of influence for love of money—no mean praise for men of power of that age. While Belloc does have a rather critical tone for Cranmer in some of his other histories, that tone is greatly reduced in his full-length study of the man. The main difference, of course, and the one which likely explains Belloc's differing evaluations is in the death of each man. Wolsey sought and likely achieved reconciliation with the Church; Cranmer abjured it. Of the three, Richelieu wins as much praise as one could possibly expect from Belloc, considering his fundamental disagreement with Richelieu's programme. He cannot resist at

nearly every turn the desire to praise Richelieu's intelligence, his foresight, his love for France, and his deferment—in more cases than not—to the immediate needs of the Church. Belloc, then, has clearly demonstrated his ability to write in measured, charitable terms about men with whom he strongly disagrees. It is a lesson from which all may learn.

The second observation we should make on Belloc's works is also one which might strike us as odd coming from Belloc, the Catholic political thinker, namely, that priests have no special skill at politics by reason of their priesthood. This point is especially well made in *Wolsey* and in *Cranmer*. While *Wolsey* is praised for having a mind capable of dealing with fantastic detail, he still lacked, in Belloc's analysis, that crucial ability to discern men's motivations. *Wolsey* failed, of course, in nearly every major attempt at foreign affairs. Only his successes at home—which were, by and large, administrative, not political—kept him in power. And *Cranmer* exhibited little interest in politics, except in so far as it facilitated his efforts to make the English Church autonomous. Cardinal Richelieu, on the other hand, was by any measure a genius at politics. There is nothing in Belloc's account, however, to suggest that Richelieu owed this ability to his priesthood.

What Belloc does say, especially concerning *Wolsey* and *Cranmer*, and arguably concerning Richelieu, is that the Church and the priesthood gave these men extensive political *opportunity*. *Wolsey* and *Cranmer* were middle-aged clerics possessed of little more than minor benefices when they were noted by political leaders and advanced along the political ladder. Richelieu, while making this advance at a much earlier age, also owes it to his priesthood that he was noticed and trusted with political matters. Consequently, because these men received their political opportunity from the Church, Belloc judges all three men more strictly than he otherwise might have judged them. All three were failures in Belloc's eyes.

The third lesson which we may draw from Belloc's essays is that commitment to the religious life tends to decline in the face of partisan politics. The crush and pace of the political world is incompatible with the thoughtful reflection needed to nourish a life in the Lord. For *Wolsey*, this principle was startlingly true. He gave

himself most completely to the worldly and to the profane. Richelieu did practically the same thing, though he seemed somewhat more attracted to abstract notions of power and influence than to material goods. Only Cranmer maintained a substantial degree of religious commitment; indeed, Belloc suggests that this commitment was the guiding force in Cranmer's life. But if Cranmer resisted rather well the allurements or worldly power, he was also the least directly involved in political affairs. About the best thing that Belloc can say about these priests in politics is that, almost without exception, their lay peers were worse. Perhaps the priesthood introduced some moderating influence after all.

A question now presents itself: is the incompatibility of priesthood and politics (an incompatibility which Wolsey, Cranmer, and Richelieu betray so forcefully) something which is unavoidable in the combination, or was it merely peculiar to these three men? To answer this question, we can only speculate for nowhere in his studies of these men does Belloc directly address the matter. (The only reason for this apparent lacuna is that, when Belloc was writing, priests in political office posed no serious problem. Certainly none presented the complex problems which priests involved in the politics of North and Central America present today.) The answer to the question lies in the nature of the religious vocation itself.

Overlooked though it may be, the essence of every religious vocation is contemplation. While different apostolates call for greater or lesser time devoted to contemplation and meditation, every priest and religious must practise some meditative prayer and usually a fairly large amount of it. Here, Belloc would insist upon the final incompatibility of the priesthood and politics. The political world does not give itself to detached reflection about ultimate things; it does not even give itself to any reasonably necessary contemplation about religious matters. Of course, politics can be a moral, noble undertaking in itself, and religious belief should guide political decision-making. But it is not proper to the religious vocation to cut it off from its contemplative roots and to immerse it in profane matters, and frequently, in personal political preferences. Yet such is the inevitable result of absorption in political affairs. Religion is indispensable to public policy; but, as Belloc's three essays have shown, priests are out of place in political office.

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