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ARE WE A "CHRISTIAN PEOPLE"?

Mass-Observation Conducts A Survey About Religion

HOW many people in the community could be called religious? How much does a movement like the present Campaign for Christian Order really affect them? What influence (if any) has the war had on their religious faith (if any)? And what part do they think the Churches can play in bringing about a better world?

To these questions we in New Zealand can give no definite answers because we have no means of obtaining accurate information. But in Great Britain a survey on "Religion and the People" has been completed recently by Mass-Observation, an independent organisation engaged in investigating the way ordinary people think and behave. Mass-Observation works through a team of full-time scientifically trained investigators and has a national panel of some 1,500 voluntary informants. Since what applies in Britain would probably, in a matter like this, largely apply here, we quote at some length from Mass-Observation's report, which was printed as a supplement to a recent issue of "The Christian News-Letter":

ACCORDING to Mass-Observation's report, the considerable apathy about religion which exists now is a negative one, based mainly on past disappointments and past inactions. There is little positive hostility, but also few optimistic expectations, and much disinterest. On the other hand, there is a widespread desire for religion to take a bigger part in the life of the community. This article outlines the present state of religious faith and alignment, and describes briefly what people feel they want and will get from religion in the future.

Beliefs

IF people are asked what their own religious beliefs are, about one in five say they have none. Younger people (under forty years) say they have no religion nearly twice as often as older people (forty years and over), and men more than twice as often as women. The

rest are almost equally divided into two-fifths who say they belong to an organised church or sect and two-fifths who express faith in some sort of personal, unaffiliated religion.

Most of the first group make no comment beyond saying the name of the church to which they belong. Among the second, non-sectarian group, however, there is often a desire for some more practical, less hide-bound form of Christianity, typically expressed in the following comment:

"I believe such as I've been taught. The trouble is to-day we're too selfish. Religion in my opinion needs humanising instead of being so stereotyped, you know." (Woman, thirty, artisan class). "Christianity practically practised, not the Go-to-Church-Sunday variety." (Man, fifty-five, middle class).

About four people out of five thus pay some sort of lip-service to religion, and only about half of these link themselves verbally with any branch of organised religion. It is difficult to obtain accurate data on the strength and importance of personal religious beliefs, because it is the socially done thing to say one has religious faith, however dim and meaningless that faith may be. These figures indicate the extent of social goodwill towards religion rather than the real extent of meaningful faith. A better index to a faith with practical implications in a person's life is prayer.

Prayer

DETAILED statements from Mass-Observation's panel of 1,500 voluntary informants show that just a half pray either regularly or occasionally. Half never pray. The number who have formed some habit of prayer is considerably lower than the number (nearly seven out of ten) who have formed the habit of observing some superstitious ritual, such as throwing spilt salt over the shoulder. Even 50 per cent. is a high estimate for the proportion who pray with definite purpose and conviction. Accounts of private prayers show that many adults have taken over a form of words from childhood and are using it still with little thought for its meaning or relevance, and sometimes with little real belief that it has a Hearer. Detailed statements on the subject of private prayer show that many of the half who pray do so just in case there is Someone listening rather than from any firm conviction that there is. As a retired school-mistress puts it:

"Partly as a result of long habit, partly as an emotional need, and slightly because I think there may be some kind of telepathic influence, I 'pray' for those whom I love."

Churchgoing

BEFORE the war a national survey made by the Gallup Poll showed that just over a quarter of the popula-

tion said they went to church regularly.

Though this is a considerably lower figure than the proportion who say they belong to some organised religious body, it represents the proportion who feel fairly strongly that they ought to go to church rather than the proportion who actually do so. Actual counts undertaken by Mass-Observation at standard churches at given services suggest that the actual proportion attending church regularly is nearer one in ten.

The main background facts of religious alignment can thus be summarised:

a. Between four-fifths and three-quarters pay some lip-service to religion.

b. About a half have some definite interest in a religious faith, deep enough to cause them to pray, at least irregularly.

c. About two-fifths pay some lip-service to organised religion.

d. About a tenth are closely linked with the organised churches.

These are rough working figures, as near the truth as one can get on a subject which is delicate to approach and on which most people have definite ideas about what their answers ought to be. One outstanding fact which emerges, and which is least capable of diverse interpretations, is that 20 per cent. are sufficiently disinterested in religion, both personally and socially, to tell a stranger in the street that they have no religious beliefs at all. Among the younger generation more than three out of ten publicly proclaim themselves unreligious.

The Impact of War

SOME clue to the nature of the present religious "revival" is given by investigations into the effects of war on people's attitude to religion. In 1941, among the national panel of observers, 16 per cent said that war had strengthened their religious faith, 9 per cent that it had been weakened, and a negligible proportion had lost their faith since the war. A year later the proportion who felt that their faith had been strengthened had risen to 26 per cent, while the same number felt that it had been weakened. The rest were unaffected; but it must be remembered that only half ever had any deep feeling for religion, so that a considerable proportion of the religious do feel that war has affected their faith. The increase in 1942 in strengthened faith was almost entirely among women, and most often took the form of attaching more importance to non-material values in general. A middle-aged woman living in a remote village which "has the misfortune of an ancient scholar of eighty as rector," and where

(Continued on next page)

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