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Greene: A Burnt-Out Case

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Again, is it books of individual Catholics or the official doctrine of the Church that he is speaking of? Of Catholic social doctrine in the official documents of the Church I think Dr. Niebuhr could not say this in fairness.

Therefore, though Dr. Niebuhr perceives in certain instances that the Church is not "monolithic," he compliments Catholics by assuming that they practise a much greater loyalty, a much greater obedience than does, as a matter of fact, exist.

Sometimes one cannot help but feel a little impatient. Dr. Niebuhr, for instance, brusquely dismisses the synderesis ("Good is to be done, Evil avoided") as useless.

It is equally impossible to derive any specific criteria from the general Thomistic proposition that we ought to do good and avoid evil.

Whoever said you could— One cannot derive the whole of reality from the notion of being nor all science from the principle of contradiction. But neither can one form any notion without the notion of being, nor make any statement without implicitly stating the principle of contradiction. Equally one cannot make any moral judgement which does not contain implicitly the synderesis, the first principle of moral theology: "Good is to be done, Evil avoided."

Despite such minor annoyances — sometimes because of them—the book is constantly stimulating. There are penetrating insights into almost every aspect of politics and extremely well-informed comments on many associated practical situations.

DANIEL CLIFFORD, S.J.

IRRELIGIOUS RELIGION?

A BURNT-OUT CASE. By Graham Greene. New York: Viking Press, 1961. viii, 248 pp.

Numbness of soul is not an uncommon experience. It comes to persons who are deeply hurt — perhaps beyond power of healing. A sensitive soul may be hurt so often as to lose all sensitivity and a person not normally sensitive can be shocked into a kind of numbness. This may be mere callousness; but there is also an ultimate condition in which a person no longer cares about anything. What happens to him or to anyone else is no longer of any interest. Nothing matters.

A person approaching such a condition could become bitter or he could become cynical. Neither bitterness nor cynicism is an ultimate condition, for a person who is bitter is a person who still cares about something, while a cynical person, though he cares much less, cares enough to see through persons and events and render unflattering (if sometimes unjust) verdicts about them. But there is a condition beyond bitterness and beyond cynicism in which nothing whatever matters to a person. Despair would be too strong a word to describe such a condition and disillusionment not strong enough. It is a condition between disillusionment and despair.

A person in such a condition is not necessarily hopeless, for though it is an ultimate condition, it is ultimate only in a relative sense. It is the end of a road but there may be other roads leading in other directions. Thus, the condition we are describing may lead eventually to a conversion or it may lead to ultimate despair.

Graham Greene has likened this condition to that of a leper whose disease is cured but who is maimed for life and deprived of the capacity for sensation. The germs are killed; the progress of leprosy is finished; but so is the man. He is no longer sick, yet he can never again be well. In the leprosaria they call such a person "a burnt-out case." It is a clinical phrase which Greene did not invent but he has applied the term to the analogous spiritual condition. The transfer of name is so apt that it will probably be universally received. "A burnt-out case" will henceforth be a permanent part of our vocabulary.

Graham Greene's latest novel is about a person who is in a spiritual sense a burnt-out case. His name is Querry, a designation not inappropriate. He is an architect who, having achieved international fame, has tired of his art. And he has been a bad man who has lived with and ruined many women and who has now become incapable of either love or lust. As the story opens, he has left Europe and has taken a river boat into the farthest outpost of civilization in Africa and this farthest outpost happens to be a leprosarium directed by Catholic priests and by an atheistic doctor. Querry decides to remain there because he has nowhere else to go. He offers to do menial jobs, like washing bandages or constructing hospital buildings and furniture. The work is unimportant and uninteresting but he must do something to earn his keep. He is in both the physical and the spiritual sense at the end of the road and he can go no farther. He is not in search of adventure or of regeneration or of happiness or even of peace; he merely wants an obscure corner to hide in and await the end.

If he could only be left alone, he might still find the things he is not looking for; but he is not left alone. A meddling priest, uncertain of his theology and insecure in his vocation, dramatizes

Querry's condition as a "dark night of the soul." A meddling merchant, ex-seminarian and amateur theologian, insists on publicizing Querry's retirement as a great saint's work among the lepers, comparing him to Schweitzer. Both priest and merchant contrive to get the outside world to know all about Querry, despite Querry's repeated request to be left strictly alone. A meddling and conscienceless journalist splashes the story in sensational (and untrue) versions in the European press. Finally a meddling woman, unhappy in marriage, deliberately frames him and accuses him of being the father of her child, because it is her strange way of showing her love for Querry and of obtaining a divorce from her husband. It would almost seem as if the story were written to prove the thesis that a man's worst enemies are those who wish him well.

The result of all this meddling is catastrophe for Querry. He had already lost his faith when he left Europe. He now loses his life. But the meddlers prosper. The woman gets her desired divorce and returns blissfully to Belgium; her husband (the meddling amateur theologian) becomes a hero for having killed his wife's supposed lover; the meddling journalist presumably finds other stories to write; and the meddling priest presumably finds other souls to wreck.

That is the story of a burnt-out case. In telling it Graham Greene manages in his brilliant way to show a number of strange things: the shallowness of priests, the dangerousness of amateur theologians, the sordidness of the marriage bed, the emptiness of the Christian Faith. A reviewer in *The Wiseman Review* (formerly *The Dublin Review*) has ventured the observation that Graham Greene is a Catholic without the Catholic Faith. Just as a person could smile and smile and be a villain, so (he says) a writer could explore religious themes and exhibit religious knowledge and yet remain fundamentally irreligious. Such a verdict may sound harsh; but one wonders if it has not hit the nail on the head.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

MAGSAYSAY'S FAILINGS?

THE MAGSAYSAY ADMINISTRATION: A Critical Assessment.

By A. V. H. Hartendorp. Manila: Philippine Education Company, 1961. xi, 532pp.

This book, a sequel to Hartendorp's earlier "History of Industry and Trade of the Philippines", assesses the achievements of the Magsaysay Administration and the post-war growth in trade and industry.