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Religion and the Future : A RETROSPECT AND A FORECAST

I

WE are all of us familiar now with the ever-recurring contrast between pre-war conditions of thought and life in England and the conditions prevalent to-day. And in practically every case the contrast is in favour of the present. That in itself is admittedly a hopeful sign. It shows that the heart of the nation is still sound in spite of the gloomy prognostications of pessimistic prophets. It proves that after all the Christian view of life as victory through suffering, sacrifice, and service was not so impossible or impracticable as many were inclined to believe. It is surely a great gain that the best minds of all classes have combined to acknowledge, not often in words, but quite unmistakably in deeds, that this Christian conception of life is the only possible one if our civilization is to triumph in this greatest of all cosmic convulsions.

But this contrast is nowhere more striking than in the realm of religion ; and without joining the unhappy throng who seem to measure the fervour of their faith by the keenness of their criticisms it may not be altogether an unprofitable task if we first notice in what respect the materialistic conceptions of the past influenced the Religion of the Church.

The Church of Christ was always intended to be in the world though not of the world, for the simple reason that in this dispensation its work lies in the world and not out of it. The monastic ideal of religious isolation may have been useful in the barbarous ages of mediæval Europe¹ but it is utterly unsuited to the modern world. The Church, therefore, in so far as she is true to her Commission, is bound to come into contact with the world, and in consequence to be influenced, however indirectly, by the ideas and opinions prevailing in Society. This is what we should expect, and this is what we find in nearly every age ; and the last fifty years in England has proved no exception. For there were powerful forces and tendencies at work outside the Church which combined to produce a

¹ See, e.g., G. B. Adams, *Civilization during the Middle Ages*, pp. 131-136 ; but cf. G. M. Trevelyan, *England in The Age of Wycliffe*, pp. 156-162 (ed. 1909) ; and especially A. F. Pollard, *Henry VIII*, pp. 330-341.

strong spirit of scepticism or indifference amongst all classes. Foremost amongst such tendencies must be placed the current conceptions concerning the supposed conclusions of modern Science. In this case the mind of the general public was well behind the times, for in spite of the declared inability of scientists to create life or explain its origin, the prevalent idea was that Science had "disproved" religion, and that therefore no thinking man need pay any attention to its claims. If the modern man had ceased to worry about his sins it was because sin was expected to disappear with the onward progress of the race. As we shall see later the popular conception was a delusion, but it undoubtedly had a considerable vogue among all sections of the population, especially amongst those who wished to be thought progressive and up-to-date. And side by side with this pseudo-scientific idea of life went a thoroughgoing materialistic view of the ideals and objects of existence. What is man but a bundle of physical atoms and forces doomed to ultimate extinction? That was the question men asked, and in reply acted on the hypothesis that all that mattered was the material aspects of life. This philosophy appealed forcibly to the average man who was glad to find some authoritative approval of a life which largely consisted of the accumulation and expenditure of money. But there was another and perhaps more potent tendency at work amongst the middle and lower classes. Since the days of Carlyle and Ruskin the People of England have been widely stirred by the social problems presented by a complex civilization. Though their interest took many different forms—Syndicalism, Socialism, Internationalism, etc.—it was a very earnest and genuine interest and became in one sense the predominant passion of the hour. It would be beside our purpose to trace the influence of these two great writers on the thought and opinion of Englishmen. But there is no doubt that they profoundly moved the social consciousness of England and led men to abandon the individualistic philosophy of Herbert Spencer for a more thoroughgoing conception of corporate action.

But the movement did not appear to captivate the imagination of the Church of England, and in spite of the heroic examples of Kingsley and Maurice, and the noble Social traditions of both the Evangelical and Oxford movements, the Church as a whole held aloof and in consequence was widely regarded as being if not actually hostile at least largely indifferent to Social Progress.

But this Social enthusiasm did not serve to eradicate from Society the prevailing indifference to the spiritual aspects of life. In many it seemed to take the place of religion altogether. And there were only too many signs that "Let us eat, drink and be merry," was the motto of the many. The consequence was to produce an unnatural stress on the pursuit of wealth and many were content to devote their time and talents to devising the means of ministering to the body and often to the flesh. The soul became the neglected factor. The mind of course received a certain amount of attention since it was a necessary element in the attainment of these desirable materialistic ends. This was the underlying cause of our indifference to real education. Money could not be spared for true education and culture, that training into what Ruskin finely calls "the perfect exercise and kingly continence of their bodies and souls."¹ It was enough if we had to pay to equip men for the "battle of life," by which was tacitly understood the ability to take one's part in a highly competitive civilization.

This attitude towards life involved inevitably a decrease of the moral sense, a blunting of the moral faculties, and so the moral problems as distinct from the social problems of our great cities were rapidly becoming an open shame; and only a few, who were promptly dubbed misguided enthusiasts, dared to raise a voice of protest against the crying evils of the time. And it is only now in the light of the awful revelations of a Royal Commission that we are really attempting to grapple with what is one of the most insidious and subtle evils of the age.

Such very briefly were the general tendencies prevailing in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war. In what ways did they influence Religion? To answer this question adequately involves an inquiry as to the manner in which the different Churches were influenced. And we can do this best by seeing how they replied to the challenge of the times. In the Church of England one of the predominant features of the situation was the attempt of the Oxford Movement to capture the masses by giving them what they were supposed to be sadly in need of and so anxious to obtain;—the full Catholic Faith and ceremonial. Beauty was captured for

¹ A *Crown of Wild Olive*, Lecture IV, which contains some of the truest remarks ever made on the nature of education.

religion, services became more ornate and elaborate, and many churches were filled in consequence, for after all, as Sohm says, the natural man is a born catholic. The movement was in harmony with the ideas of the time, for under the influence of Ruskin art was being more widely appreciated, and the social instincts of men found satisfaction in the doctrine of a divine Society on earth. But though the movement achieved much in various directions it cannot be said to have made the Church of England the Church of the English people, and there are not wanting signs that as a force it has somewhat spent itself.

The Evangelicals, on the other hand, who could not conscientiously turn their services into an elaborate ceremonial for soothing the senses of men and women jaded by the pursuit of pleasure or of wealth, were still too encumbered by a traditional distrust of intellectual activity to grapple with the situation ; though in the last ten years, following the lead of Bishop Lightfoot and others, that reproach has been largely removed. But unfortunately much of their energy was absorbed by controversial activities no doubt forced upon them by the rise of a new school of thought which dealt in a distinctly high-handed manner with the Articles and formularies of the Church. But that ought not to have made them forget their magnificent social tradition, which was, however, exactly what occurred. It was left for the leaders of the Oxford Movement to attempt to stir the consciousness of the Church in social matters, and to their eternal credit many of them responded to the lead of Bishop Gore, and by means of the Christian Social Union endeavoured to awaken the Church to a sense of her social responsibilities. The modern Evangelicals, however, stand in a better position for grappling with the problems of the future than any other form of Christianity. They are no longer bound by a rigid theory of verbal inspiration and they have frankly admitted the need of definite instruction if the convert is to develop into the mature and thoughtful Christian. They hold a view of Church Organization which, while thoroughly in accord with the New Testament, does not involve the uncharitable "unchurching" of other Christian societies who confess the Faith once for all delivered to the saints. They are not compelled to hand over their Nonconformist brethren to the uncovenanted mercies of God, and are free to recognize within their Churches the fruits of the Spirit of God. They can share in the glorious

heritage of the Reformation with all its boundless possibilities for the future. For that movement was not merely a great event in time but a series of events which will never close so long as there remain any forces which fight against the freedom and the truth of the Gospel. They hold a definite historical position in the Church of England and possess an honourable record of religious activity and social service. The future is theirs if only they will face its challenge with faith, confidence and courage.

In other directions the Church of England made some attempts to grapple with this problem of the silent aloofness of the masses. The Church of England Men's Society was a noble attempt, but for some reason or other even that Society has not proved the triumphant success that was predicted and expected of it. Perhaps the root of the trouble lay in the fact that the laity have yet to realize that they, and not the clergy only, constitute the Church. To the average man it must be admitted that the Church of England presented, and still presents, a melancholy spectacle of divided counsels. Her machinery for self-expression and self-government as at present constituted cannot be said to impress the imagination of working men, who in their representative trade union assemblies have set a fine example of constitutional machinery which though hastily improvised appears extremely effective.

With regard to the Roman Catholic Church she played her cards with that ability and skill which we have learnt to expect of her. But moral enthusiasm has never been a foremost constituent of her faith, and fettered by dogmas the baselessness of which was obvious even to the man in the street, she was even more incapable of influencing society than any other form of organized religion. Naturally the Roman Catholic Church appeals forcibly to those who will not be content until they have found an absolute authority for their faith, as well as to those who prefer ritual to reason and both to Revelation. She possesses indeed a theory of development which might seem to place her in thorough harmony with an age whose watchword is Evolution. But it is not the kind of development which will appeal very forcibly to the modern man when it is found to involve the co-operation of an infallible authority to determine the validity of its developments.¹ And in spite of the most diplomatic handling of

¹ The Roman Catholic theory of Development is subjected to a searching examination and criticism in Canon Storr's *Development and Divine Purpose*, pp. 24 foll.

every situation that may arise, the historic enemy of religious and political freedom is not likely to contribute much that is valuable to the solution of the problem of an essentially democratic State.

The Free Churches were in a slightly different position. They are by nature democratic institutions as apparently were the early Christian Societies, and in consequence make a stronger appeal to the masses than the more formal edifices of organized religion. They had a far greater grip of the working man and endeavoured successfully to present the social ideal of the Gospel. But they were losing themselves in the greatness of their task. They became immersed in the social side of the Gospel sometimes to the detriment of its central truths. And on the exalted plea of carrying religion into all the departments of life their ministers became in some cases politicians with a belief in Christianity rather than ministers of a Gospel which is social as well as redemptive.

What therefore is the result of our survey? Briefly and very broadly it may be put thus: that up to the outbreak of war the two great forces of organized Christianity in England—the Church of England and the Free Churches—proved for opposite reasons incapable of winning the masses. The former because she seemed too archaic in structure, and too immersed in endless theological controversies to possess a real Gospel for the working man or to care for his unhappy social condition. The latter largely failed because in the last resort men do not come to church because they are politicians; they come because every man at one time or other feels the force of the religious instinct in him and wants to satisfy it. And though politics in the pulpit may sometimes be expedient, and occasionally necessary, a too close adhesion on the part of particular Churches to one particular set of Political theories will not help to commend the Gospel to those who differ and who might otherwise be persuaded to join. The working man is not indifferent to the Gospel, but he will hold aloof from the Church if he thinks it will repel him either by the intricacies of its services,¹ the aloofness of its congregation or the obtrusive political opinions of its minister. Trivial reasons,

¹ The simplification of some of the Anglican services is what is mostly to be desired to-day, and not the indulgence of liturgical fads. As to the amount of education required for the proper appreciation of a Catholic Service, Canon E. A. Burroughs has some wise words to say in *The Valley of Decision*, p. 171 and foll.

perhaps, but powerful in their operation like many other social conventions.

And now comes the cosmic cataclysm of the Age.

It is a trite commonplace to remark that the war has created a new situation in religion as in all the other departments of life. Many theories supposed to be established beyond all dispute have suddenly been proved not only to be devoid of all infallibility but extremely precarious bases for future development and progress. As an example take the pre-war view of the evolution of Society. We thought we were well on the road towards realizing the ideal of humanity in a state of enlightenment and peace. The existing evils of society were regarded as but the inevitable shadows cast by the ever-increasing light of the dawning day. Life in time would be stripped of all its grosser elements, and under the benignant rule of Science, Equality and Fraternity we should march to the perfect day. It was a wonderful dreamland, a rosy-tinted garden but now washed with tears. And why? Because we thought that the magic words Evolution and Progress explained everything. But now philosophic theories have been brought into contact with reality. In the days of peace and plenty it was an interesting pastime to paint the future of Society as one continual progress culminating in a state of righteousness and peace, but now that the Infinite God has spoken in no uncertain voice the fragile edifices of finite mentality stand revealed in all their uncertainty and impotence. Those who basked in the sunshine of a facile philosophy of life have been rudely awoken to find themselves blundering in a welter of blood and tears. But after all that is only the inevitable nemesis of scepticism. It is the price we have to pay for living on the platitudes of a peaceful philosophy rather than on the realities of a robust religion. As Dr. Forsyth has well said in his latest and most stimulating work, "God has entered the pulpit and preaches in His own way by deeds. And His sermons are long and taxing and spoil the dinner. Clearly God's problem with the world was more serious than we thought."¹ Men had become so immersed in the world that God was forgotten; but if men had forgotten God, God had not forgotten men; and in the thunderings of His voice we are beginning to dimly apprehend the

¹ *The Justification of God*, p. 23. All who wish to enter into the real heart of this struggle should read this illuminating treatise.

intensity of His Purpose. And now that the heart of this People has been moved as never before, it is not unreasonable to expect some very drastic readjustment of pre-war conceptions and values. But so far, though the spiritual lessons of the war have not been altogether ignored, there is as yet no great indication that men are going to look to the Church for that guidance and leadership which by virtue of Him whom she represents, it is hers to give. On the contrary there still seems to be a lingering suspicion that God is not so good or so powerful as He has been generally depicted. It is not that men any longer believe in the bankruptcy of a Christianity which has never been given a chance in the modern state, but they look with suspicion upon the Church as not really representing the beneficent Son of Man of whom they read in their Gospels. They seem to perceive some incompatibility between the Christ of the Gospels and the Christ of the Ecclesiastical Societies. And so shallow are many of these spiritual impressions which some have gained from the events of to-day that there is a serious danger that human nature will assert itself all too quickly, when this "overflowing scourge" has passed away, and the inherent indolence of our mortal wills may deprive our more energetic leaders of that moral support which is so essential if they are to achieve that reconstruction of our civilization which is the imperative requirement of the present.

It must not, however, be supposed that the Church has done nothing during these strenuous days to recall the Nation to a realization of the seriousness of passing events. But there is no doubt that in the past her faith has been too quiescent. In so far as she has been an active force in the community, striving to make the Law of Christ operative in the Social Order, it has been largely owing to the enthusiasm of the few rather than the concentrated energy of the many. There has been no grand and inspiring attempt to marshal the Christian forces of England against the foes confronting the Church. Our warfare has been purely and strictly trench warfare, without the encouraging prospect of any grand advance in the future. The most we seemed capable of achieving was spasmodic and not altogether successful raids into the enemy's trenches. And the bombardment that followed, and the differences and animosities at the various Headquarters, made all such efforts appear as hardly worth the cost. The National Mission was indeed in the nature of a successful "push" by one Army, but the advance badly needs

consolidating. Our Christian warfare of the past has not been of a kind to inspire much enthusiasm or achieve great results. The consequence is that the main problem for the Church now is How can she advance on a vast front, consolidating her gains as she goes, and be ever ready and able to press towards the goal—the Christianizing of the masses of England?

Now there is one very obvious weakness which has hampered the Church in the past and which we must briefly examine before we proceed to see what elements of hope exist for the Church in the present situation.

CLIFFORD J. OFFER.

(*To be concluded.*)

