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PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY AND THE LOWER CLASSES.¹

I.

It is the custom of the Evangelical Social Congress² to devote some of its working hours to a subject that necessitates withdrawal from the noisy arena of present-day problems. We retire to the quiet study of the scholar and the man of theory, there to examine ourselves awhile—to reflect, it may be, on the latest principles of social ethics, or to consider historically some characteristic social phenomena of the past.

In choosing as my subject "Primitive Christianity and the Lower Classes" I have had in view the historical variety of self-examination. The subject is an inquiry into the relation in which the Gospel and its makers stood to the great mass of the small and the weak. It thus undertakes, we may say, to apply the historical test to our old watchwords, "Evangelical Social" and "Christian Social." Not one of us who has been actively engaged in the social movement during the last twenty years can say that the subject is unfamiliar. In many of us it awakens memories of delightful old wanderings in search of a social-political programme

¹ Address delivered at the Evangelical Social Congress, Dessau, June 10, 1908, by Professor Deissmann, and translated for the EXPOSITOR by Lionel R. M. Strachan, M.A., Lector of English in the University of Heidelberg. In substance, and occasionally also in form, Professor Deissmann's remarks are based upon earlier works of his, particularly his recently published book, *Licht vom Osten*, Tübingen, 1908. (Where no reference is given the New Testament passages are such as can be easily found.)

² The Evangelical Social Congress was inaugurated in 1890. Its objects are to investigate impartially the social conditions of Germany, to test them by the moral and religious standard of the Gospel, and to make the Gospel teaching more efficacious and fruitful than hitherto in the economic life of the present day. The President of the Congress is now Professor Adolf Harnack.

which we felt could be found in the Gospels with as little trouble as the text for a Whitsun sermon.

The psychological explanation of the attempts to found a social-political programme on the New Testament is simple enough. After the foundation of the German Empire the work of Adolf Stöcker¹ and Friedrich Naumann² brought social questions down like devouring flames on the consciences of the rising generation, and many felt instinctively that if they were to abide by the old Gospel they could not help being interested in social questions. Those who were not already by education and temperament linked heart and soul with the lower classes were filled by the spirit of the New Testament with unquenchable sympathy for the humble masses. With hearts thus stirred it was almost a matter of course for many to reformulate the old Protestant Scriptural principle by saying that the New Testament must be the normative authority for social politics.

The counterpart to this Christian Social romanticism of the earlier period was to be found in certain convictions that sprang up amongst the lower classes of our population under the influence of Socialism. They flourish still, and not unfrequently find expression in newspapers, cheap pamphlets, public meetings, and correspondence columns³ as the voice of the labouring people. Certain beliefs have gathered round the figure of Jesus, the social reformer. As a "carpenter's son" He appeals naturally to the proletariat, and they have come to regard Him as a martyr for communism and the social revolution, one who fell fighting against the exploiters.

¹ The veteran court chaplain and member of the Reichstag, author of *Christlich-Sozial* (1890) and many subsequent works.

² Another politician who has stood in the pulpit. He is editor of *Die Hilfe* (since 1895), author of many books, and still in the prime of life.

³ Cf., for instance, "Religiöse Fragen aus der unteren Schicht" in *Patria* (Jahrbuch der Hilfe), 1905, p. 144, No. 33.

The spontaneous emotions of the social-democratic proletariat,¹ however, are not without some sort of learned support from educated men. Karl Kautsky² has explained Primitive Christianity as being essentially the outcome of the communistic movement under the Roman Empire. The great feuilleton-writer, Albert Kalthoff,³ of Bremen, gifted with a still greater amount of inventive imagination, has derived Christianity from the combined effect of the ancient popular philosophy, the proletarian spirit of communistic associations, and the passion of the Jewish Messianic hopes.

Taken as a whole, these hypotheses must be altogether rejected. Any permanent importance that they possess is due not to their authors' knowledge of the historical sources, nor to their considered judgment in working up and arranging facts, but to their instinct. It is the same instinct which fills the social-democratic proletarian with sympathy for the carpenter's son, no matter how much he mistrusts the official church. The same instinct coined the watchwords "Christian Social" and "Evangelical Social" and threw the New Testament into the social ferment of our day. It is the pure sense-impression that (to put it quite generally) there was a close connexion between Primitive Christianity and the lower classes.

The weakness of Kautsky's and Kalthoff's hypotheses, apart from their more or less consistent exclusion of creative personalities from all share in the origin of Christianity, is

¹ Cf. the excellent statement and criticism of these theories by Ernst Troeltsch in his important series of essays in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, vol. 26, and Adolf Harnack's review of the same in the *Preussische Jahrbücher*, vol. 131, part 3.

² A Socialist journalist of over thirty years' standing. He is the founder and editor of *Die Neue Zeit*, a weekly organ of the German Social Democrats. He recently published a book, *Der Ursprung des Christentums, eine historische Untersuchung*, Stuttgart, 1908.

³ Author of *The Rise of Christianity*, translated by Joseph McCabe, London (Watts), 1907.

obvious enough. Chiefly it lies in their venturing to solve one of the most tremendous problems of historical science solely on a dilettante book-knowledge of the Roman Imperial age, derived at second or third hand from works that in many of their details are now out of date. Blinded by doctrinaire prepossessions, they misunderstand and do fantastic violence to the New Testament, the one main source of information, while the other complex of sources they have not regarded seriously at all: I mean the original documents, left by the lower classes contemporary with Primitive Christianity, which have been made newly accessible to scholars by the archæological discoveries of the last twenty or thirty years.

In the present generation some at least of the German educated classes, particularly members of the academic class, have learned to look on social facts of the present day in the light of actuality and to see in the existence of different social levels a living cultural force. It will always remain a most remarkable fact that in the same generation the discovery of abundant new texts on stone, earthenware, and papyrus has for the first time brought the study of antiquity into real touch with the lower classes of the age in which Christianity grew up.

Our previous knowledge of the world contemporary with Primitive Christianity was in all its essentials derived from the remains of classical literature.

In the literary memorials, however, what we have is practically the evidence of the upper, cultivated class about itself. The lower classes are seldom allowed to speak, and where they do come to the front—in the comedies, for instance—they stand before us for the most part in the light that is thrown on them from above. The old Jewish literature, it is true, has preserved along with its superabundance of learned dogma much that belongs to the people—the

Rabbinic texts are a mine of information for the folklorist to explore—yet it may be said of the Graeco-Roman literature of the Imperial age that it is on the whole the reflection of the dominant class, possessed of power and culture ; and this upper class has been almost always taken as identical with the whole ancient world of the Imperial age. Compared with Primitive Christianity, advancing like the under-current of a lava-stream with irresistible force from its source in the East, this upper stratum appears cold, exhausted, lifeless. Senility, the feature common to upper classes everywhere, was seized upon as characteristic of the whole age in which the great religious revolution came, and thus we have the origin of the gloomy picture that people are still fond of drawing as soon as they attempt to sketch for us the background of Christianity in its early days.

This fatal generalization of course involves a great mistake. The upper class has been simply confused with the whole body of society, or, to use another expression, Primitive Christianity has been compared with an incommensurable quantity. By its social structure Primitive Christianity points emphatically to the middle and lower class. Its relations to the upper class are very scanty at the outset. Jesus of Nazareth was a carpenter, Paul of Tarsus a weaver of tent-cloth, and the words of St. Paul at the close of the first chapter of his first Epistle to Corinth, about the origin of his congregations in the lower classes of the great towns, form one of the most important testimonies, historically speaking, that Primitive Christianity gives of itself. Primitive Christianity is another instance of the truth taught us with each return of springtime, viz., that the sap rises upward from below. Primitive Christianity stood to the upper class in natural opposition, not so much because it was Christianity, but because it was a movement of the lower classes. The only comparison possible, therefore, is that between the

Primitive Christians and the corresponding class among the pagans.

Until recently the men of this class were almost entirely lost to the historian. Now, however, thanks to the discovery of their own authentic records, they have suddenly risen again from the rubbish-mounds of the ancient cities, little market towns, and villages. They plead so insistently to be heard that there is nothing for it but to yield them calm and dispassionate audience. The chief and most general value of the non-literary written memorials of the Roman Empire, I think, is this: They help to correct our picture of the ancient world, which has been viewed hitherto exclusively from above. They place us in the midst of that class in which we have to think of the Apostle Paul gathering his early Christian recruits. This statement, however, must not be pressed. Of course among the inscriptions and papyri of that time there are many that do not come from the lower class but owe their origin to Caesars, generals, statesmen, municipalities, and rich people. But side by side with these texts lies evidence of the middle and lower classes, in countless depositions made by themselves and recognizable in most cases at once as such by their contents or the peculiarity of their language. These are records of the people's speech, records of the insignificant affairs of insignificant persons. Peasants and artisans, soldiers and slaves and mothers speak to us of their cares and labours. The unknown and the forgotten, for whom there was no room in the pages of the annals, come trooping into the lofty halls of our museums, and in the libraries, folio on folio, are ranged the precious editions of the new texts.

We have to do chiefly with Greek and Latin inscriptions, inscribed sheets of papyrus, and earthenware potsherds. The bulk of the inscriptions are on stone, but to these must be added inscriptions cast and engraved in bronze or scratched on tablets of lead or gold, a few wax tablets, the

scribblings (*graffiti*) found on walls, and the texts on coins and medals. These inscriptions, of which there are hundreds of thousands, are discovered on the site of the ancient civilized settlements of the Graeco-Roman world, in its fullest extent from the Rhine to the upper course of the Nile, and from the Euphrates to Britain.

The papyri come almost invariably from Egypt. They have generally been dug out of the dust-heaps of ancient towns and are non-literary in character. For instance, they include legal documents of all possible kinds: leases, bills and receipts, marriage-contracts, bills of divorce, wills, decrees issued by authority, denunciations, suings for punishment, minutes of judicial proceedings, tax-papers in great numbers. Then there are letters and notes, schoolboys' exercise books, magical texts, horoscopes, diaries, etc. As regards their contents these non-literary documents are as many-sided as life itself. Those written in Greek, several thousand in number, cover a period of roughly a thousand years. The oldest go back to the early Ptolemaic period, i.e., the third century B.C.; the most recent bring us well into the Byzantine period. All the chequered history of Hellenized and Romanized Egypt in that thousand years passes before our eyes on those tattered sheets. The Greek documents are supplemented by large numbers of others in Aramaic, Demotic, Coptic, Arabic, Latin, Hebrew and Persian. Of the most ancient hieroglyphic papyri we here say nothing, but there should be no possibility of disagreement as to the value of those we have mentioned for the scientific study of antiquity in the widest sense. They mean nothing less than the reconstitution of a large portion of the life lived by the ancients. They bear witness to the condition of affairs in the past with a freshness, warmth and sincerity such as we can boast of in no ancient writer and in but very few of the ancient inscriptions. The record handed down by the ancient authors is

always, even in the best of cases, indirect, and has always been somehow or other touched up or toned down. The inscriptions are often cold and lifeless. The papyrus sheet is far more living. We see the handwriting, the irregular characters; we see men. We gaze into the inmost recesses of individual lives. The souls of these men of old, seemingly long since perished, live once more. Fate is indeed kind to the scholar who will study the lower classes at the turn of the new great epoch in religion. He can take in his hand, for example, the original letter¹ sent by a Roman soldier of the second century A.D. to his father, and he can read what the young man, just arrived in Italy, wrote home to his native village in Egypt:—

“Apion to Epimachos, his father and lord, many greetings! Before all things I pray that thou art in health, and that thou dost prosper and fare well continually together with my sister and her daughter and my brother. I thank the lord Serapis that he saved me immediately when I was in peril in the sea. When I came to Miseni I received as viaticum (journey-money) from the Caesar three pieces of gold. And it is well with me. I beseech thee, therefore, my lord father, write unto me a little letter, firstly of thy health, secondly of that of my brother and sister, thirdly that I may behold thy hand with reverence, because thou hast taught me well and I therefore hope to advance quickly, if the G[o]ds will. Greet Kapito[n mu]ch and m[y] brother and sis[t]er and Se[reni]lla and m[y] friend[s]. I sent [or “am sending”] the[e] by Euktemon a little [pic]ture of me. [Moreover] my name i[s] Antonis Maximos. Fare thee well, I pray. Centuri[a] Athenonike. There saluteth thee Serenos the son of Agathos [Da]jimon, [and . . .]s the son of [. . .]r

¹ Papyrus in the Berlin Museum. Text, facsimile, and commentary in Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, pp. 116 ff.

and Turbon the son of Gallonios and . [. . .] [. . .]
 . . . [. . .] [. . .] . [. . .] . [. . .] .”

The address on the back :—

“T[o] Ph[il]adelphia for Epim X achos from Apion his son.”

Two lines running in the opposite direction have been added :—

Give this to the first Cohort **X** of the Apamenians to (?) J[uli]a[n]os
 the Librarios, from Apion so **An** . [. .]
 that (he may convey it) to Epimachos
 his father.

Deciphering another original letter ¹ of the same period we light upon a most affecting picture, a living illustration of our Saviour's parable of the Prodigal Son. These are the cries that reach us from the mangled lines—a prodigal's cries for help, addressed to his mother :—

“ Antonis Longos to Neilus [h]is mother ma[n]y greetings !
 And continually do I pray that thou art in health. I [mak]e supplication for thee daily to the lord [Ser]japis. I would thou shouldst understand that I had no hope that thou wouldst go up to the metropolis. And therefore I came not to the city. But I was a[sh]a[m]ed to come to Karanis, because I walk about in rags. I write [or “ have written ”] to thee that I am naked. I besee[c]h thee, mother, be r[e]conciled to me. Furthermore, I know what I have brought upon myself. I have been chastened every way. I know that I have sinned. I have heard from [Post]umos, who met thee in the country about Arsinoë and out of season told thee all things. Knowest thou not that I had rather be maimed than know that I still owe a man an obol ? come thyself ! I have heard that I beseech thee I almost I beseech thee I will not d[o] otherwise.”

¹ Papyrus in the Berlin Museum. Text, facsimile, etc. in Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, pp. 123 ff.

Here the papyrus breaks off. On the back is the address :—
 “[.] the mother, from Antonios Longos her son.”

A letter¹ dated June 17, of the year 1 B.C., permits us a shuddering glimpse of the fortunes of a proletarian family. With a curious mixture of the sentimental and the brutal, Hilarion, an Egyptian labourer, writes from the capital, Alexandria, to his wife, whom he had left at the little town of Oxyrhynchos expecting her confinement :—

“Hilarion to Alis his sister, many greetings! Also to Berus my lady and Apollonaris. Know that we are still even now in Alexandria [*sic*]. Be not distressed if at the general coming in I remain at Alexandria. I pray thee and beseech thee, take care of the little child. And as soon as we receive wages I will send thee up [*mistake for* ‘send (them) up to thee’]. If thou — — art delivered, if it was [*mistake for* ‘be’] a male child, let it live; if it was female, cast it out. Thou saidst unto Aphrodisias, ‘Forget me not!’ How can I forget thee? I pray thee, therefore, that thou be not distressed. (Year) 29 of the Caesar, Pauni 23.”

On the back the address :—

“Hilarion to Alis. Deliver.”

The inscribed potsherds, which few scholars yet care to take any notice of, lead us still lower in the social scale. The ostraca, as the potsherds are called, come like the papyri in thousands from the rubbish-mounds of ancient places in Egypt. In a climate like ours the preservation of the papyri and ostraca for such a long space of time would indeed have been impossible. After the fire that took place in the Rathaus at Heidelberg in March, 1908, the debris was carted away to the rubbish-shoots of the town. Then indeed it was possible to pick out from the charred bundles of archives of the Board of Guardians documents not unlike the ostraca in

¹ Papyrus published by Grenfell and Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (iv.), No. 744. Facsimile, etc. in Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, pp. 106 ff.

their social import. But, written on such poor stuff as our paper, how long would a widow's application for relief be preserved in the earth of our rubbish-heaps? On the other hand, the dryness of the Egyptian climate and the excellent quality of the ancient writing material have rendered possible the preservation of texts that were thrown away as worthless thousands of years ago, and it happens that quite a number of widows' petitions have come to light amongst the discoveries from those ancient times. The writing material in special use by the poor, viz., the potsherd, was endowed with immortality. In spite of its durability it was also the cheapest of writing materials, obtainable by every one gratis from the nearest rubbish-heap. For this reason it was so admirably adapted for recording the vote of the Demos in those attainders by potsherd at Athens of which we used to hear at school under the name of ostracism. The ostrakon was beneath the dignity of the well-to-do. As a proof of the poverty of Cleanthes the Stoic it is related that he could not afford papyrus and therefore wrote on ostraca or on leather. In the same way we find the writers of Coptic potsherd letters even in Christian times apologising now and then to their correspondents for having made use of an ostrakon in temporary lack of papyrus. We, however, have cause to rejoice at the breach of etiquette. The ostraca take us right to the heart of the class to which the Primitive Christians were most nearly related, and in which the new faith struck root in the great world. Most particularly the potsherds enable us to see into the economic life of the poorer classes, for the writing they bear is most often a tax-receipt. St. Paul's injunction (Rom. xiii. 7) to the Christians to pay their taxes properly ("tribute to whom tribute") acquires a new significance when we learn that 218 different sorts of dues are known from the ostraca to have existed in Egypt alone. So too upon the family life of the poorer people much

light is shed by the potsherd letters and other allied documents.

We have every right to say that an entirely new world is opened up to the student in this multitude of ancient lower-class documents. Where formerly there was nothing but a great grey expanse we now see the most brilliant variety of colours in every degree of shade. Once it was all promiscuous scrimmage, the swarming masses presented nothing but insoluble historical riddles ; now single individuals emerge, clean cut and tangible types of the life lived by the masses at the turn of the new great epoch in religion—men who worked with their hands on field and dyke, in the scribe's chamber, aboard the Nile boat. We can check their accounts for wages, taxes, and rent. The prices of corn and oil, fish and sparrows, how much was paid for a draught-camel and how much for a slave, what a wife brought with her as her portion and how the husband was to treat her—all this we can calculate to the last obol and date to the year and the day with the original memoranda of the persons lying before us. The period of dreams, in which Kautsky and Kalthoff rhapsodized and preached about the life of the ancient proletariat, has given way to the age of factual research—painful research into minute facts. To one engaged in this research there often comes a feeling as if some invisible authority, sovereignly disposing of the centuries, had held a deferred inquiry into the social conditions of the early Roman Empire. In hundreds and thousands the single texts come pouring in upon the historian's desk, and with them he is to construct in mosaic a complete picture of the life of the masses in antiquity. These ancient materials, however, are altogether more straightforward and trustworthy than the replies reluctantly penned to so many modern inquiry schedules that issue from official quarters.

It is true, not every one engaged in research has the eyes to read these materials and the mind to appreciate them. There are still antiquarians to whom the mutilated fragment of a commonplace Alexandrian hexameter is more interesting than an original letter written by a poor widow or the original contract for the sale of a slave. Anything with a shimmer of culture in it is still so vastly over-valued, anything in the shape of a book is still held in such special veneration, that many people fail to realize how greatly a bit of ancient life, a fragment of ancient naïve reality, exceeds in value a fragment of ancient artificiality. But there is no doubt that attention paid to social problems of the present day will react beneficially upon the study of the life of the people in ancient times. It will help to spread the conviction that the innumerable popular texts recently discovered are not curiosities to be dismissed with a blasé smile by dwellers in our modern great cities, but that, taken together, they afford invaluable and irreplaceable material for the reconstruction of the civilization amid which Christianity arose and within which its chief work lay during its creative period.

The study of the civilization of the ancient lower classes is still in its infancy. One problem in particular is still far from being solved, viz., the problem as to the actual amount of division between the classes. It is still uncommonly difficult to separate sharply from one another the three classes, lower, middle and upper, which we should expect to find on *a priori* grounds.

What we can perhaps already make out is that the lower classes are divided off from an upper class distinguished by the possession of power, literary culture, and wealth. We must guard against expressing this contrast as though the whole mass of the uncultured were below and the sparse number of cultured persons above. Even in the classes that

I call "lower" there was not a complete absence of culture, as was pointed out very rightly by Adolf Harnack not long ago; and, on the other hand, the upper class is not without crass examples of the reverse of culture. If we regard culture as a factor in the division of classes among the ancients, the point of importance is rather the opposition between the more literary, reflected culture of the upper class and the more non-literary, naïve culture of the lower classes. St. Paul, who was keenly alive to this contrast, gives expression to it with a fine irony that discloses his strong sympathy for the lower classes. He places on the one side the "wise men," and on the other side those whom the world considers "foolish" (1 Cor. i. 26 ff.). Of course he does not mean to say that they really are stupid. This remark applies also to the emphatic words of Jesus (Matt. xi. 25; Luke x. 21), to which St. Paul was perhaps alluding, that God had revealed Himself not to "the wise [and prudent]" but to "babes." What wealth of spiritual culture there was in those lower classes, dull and apathetic as they were deemed by many, and how remarkably open-hearted and responsive they were in their inmost lives, is shown to us by some of the papyrus letters written by unknown Egyptian men and women in that critical epoch of the world's religion.

But if we are thus able to mark off the lower classes from the upper, it follows from what has been said that we must avoid the error of regarding the lower classes as a uniform complex. Indeed, there can be no doubt that amid the non-literary masses of the Hellenistic East with which we are concerned there was a further marked subdivision into classes. The difference between the lower classes in the great towns and those in the small towns and villages must have been considerable. Our subject will bring us back to this question of differentiation once again later on.

ADOLF DEISSMANN.