

The Christian Outlook upon Democracy.

NOT so long ago we were accustomed to speak of Democracy as if it were a fixed institution. It was a word which, like Justice, Liberty and Progress, belonged to the liturgy of every Liberal faith, and the democratic principle itself was something which, like the laws of Nature, we could take for granted. To-day it is not so. We are assured in many quarters that democracy is outmoded and that the modern State can no longer be cumbered with it. The modern State must be able to make quick decisions and enforce them, and considerations of popular freedom and government by consent must yield before this practical necessity.

Can this question be said to have any religious or Christian significance? It may be argued that Christianity is properly independent of all political institutions. The Christian faith has existed under many forms of government and will yet exist, no doubt, under many more. Thus, to identify Christianity with Socialism or Capitalism, with Monarchy or Republicanism, would be grotesque. This is true. But it does not follow that questions of government and of systems of government lie outside the limits of a proper Christian concern. For it cannot be denied that such questions affect the interests of the people: and whatever affects the people and the life of the people is rightly the concern of religion. Moreover, though it is true that the Christian faith has existed, and will yet exist, under many different forms of government, it is also true that there are some forms of government which are more compatible than others with the spirit and genius of the Faith. For instance, no one would say that a government based upon slavery is compatible with the genius of Christianity: or that a military State organised for aggression and conquest is compatible with it; or that a government organised on the theory of the supremacy of a single race is compatible with it.

But what do we mean by "the genius of the Faith?" It may be argued that whatever the creative impulse of Christianity may have been, Christianity itself developed very speedily into a centralised and disciplined hierarchy. This is historically the fact in the sense that in the early Christian centuries the Church organised itself on the pattern of the Roman Empire; but it is not true in the sense that the essential genius of Christianity had any affinity with the spirit and principle of Cæsarism. (William Booth organised his evangelistic movement upon the pattern of the British Army, but this is not to say that the Salvation Army has essential affinities with militarism, nor even

that autocracy is its natural and most effective medium.) A more plausible argument would be that the genius of Christianity is Communitistic: for it is undeniable that the early Christians organised themselves into a sort of improvised commune and had "all things common." It must be remembered, however, that this communism was based upon a belief in the speedy end of the world. It was distributive but not productive. It was the spontaneous "sharing" of little groups of persecuted refugees who had no thought of establishing a new order, but only of living from hand to mouth until the dissolution of all things.

If we seek the genius of the Faith we must look deeper. It may be more plausible than true to "simplify" Christianity into the formula "the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man". It is not easy to believe that the first Christians would have recognised that formula as an epitome of their faith. But it certainly is true that the spirit of essential Christianity was and is the spirit of love—love not simply for the brotherhood, but for all men, friends and enemies; and for all classes of men, rich and poor, bond and free: and love, too, for all races, Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian. And this love was no mere lyrical emotion; it was principled in great doctrine. It grew out of the recognition of God's love for the world and of man's value for God—man's value not as a Christian but as a man. For, even as an impenitent sinner, man had this inalienable dignity, that he was never swept aside as negligible: even under condemnation, under judgment, his very reprobation witnessed to his worth. Here, in this sense of human worth and dignity—in this sense of holy, redeeming love, flooding all barriers of class and caste and race—we come near to the genius of the Faith.

And if we ask, what form of organisation best expresses this spirit, we have the answer in Christ's own recorded words: "*Be not ye called Rabbi, for one is your teacher, even Christ, and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon earth, for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.*" "*The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he that is chief as he that doth serve I am among you as he that serveth.*"

The Christian society was to be, not, indeed, a fellowship of equals, but a fellowship in which inequality was socialised and made to minister to the elevation of all. Power was not to be exploited to gain advantage for the powerful; it was to be used for the strengthening of the weak: moreover, it was not to be employed coercively, in the way of an overlording benefaction,

but co-operatively, in the spirit of service for the good of all. The Christian society, in short, was to be a community of brothers; its immediate authority was the community itself—the general will; its supreme authority, the will of God in Christ. But this supreme will was not arbitrarily imposed; it worked through the consent of the community. "One is your master, even Christ," but, "*I am among you as he that serveth.*" "*Henceforth I call you not servants but friends.*" This is another way of saying that the system implicit in these teachings was that of a spiritual democracy or Theo-democracy.

It may, however, be objected with some force that a system which is suited to a regenerate community confessing a common allegiance, a common interest and a common inspiration, is not necessarily suited to the practical necessities and the actual conditions of ordinary human society; that, on the contrary, the teaching of Christianity respecting the sinfulness of man points the other way. Can a mixed society of men and women in which the "unregenerate," the thoughtless, the careless, predominate, be wisely entrusted with self-government? How easily the masses can be exploited! How easily wild passions can be unleashed! In a community in which reason and conscience prevailed, democracy would be safe; but where is that community to be found among the nations of the world? But this objection covers every form of human government. For the sinfulness of man is not limited to "the people"; it must be equally true, also, of their masters; and if popular governments are corruptible so also are despotic or bureaucratic governments. If it is said that human nature is so imperfect that no people is fit for self-government, it may be urged with equal force that, human nature being so imperfect, no man is fit to be a dictator.

The truth is, of course, that, in this imperfect world, no system of government can yield perfect results. But we have come to believe that there is a divine purpose not only for the Church but also for the world, and that that purpose is the development and setting up at last of a World Society—a living, growing fellowship of all peoples and tribes and tongues. If this is our faith, then it follows that the Church is set here in the midst of the peoples as the inspirational centre of world-righteousness, working upon the nations, not by the constraints of temporal power, but through spiritual influence, commending the truth to every man's conscience in the sight of God. In this sense the function of the Christian Church in a sub-Christian civilisation is to impress upon men's minds the standards and values of Christ and the authority of His Spirit, and, by thus influencing the mind and will and soul of the peoples, to influence likewise the policy of nations and to draw them into

moral fellowship—into community of faith, of purpose and of life.

Now, if this is so, the system of government which is best suited to serve this world-purpose is democracy; not necessarily a system of Parliamentary institutions as we know them (for no doubt there is room for radical alteration and reform), but a system which, no matter what may be its instruments of administration, rests upon the free and covenanted and constitutionally safeguarded consent of the people. No other system has such affinity with the genius and method of Christianity itself: no other system provides the Faith with such opportunity, through influencing the general will, to effect a Christian transformation in world-conditions. For how, except through the principle of popular government, can world-union ever be achieved as a moral fellowship? A union of the peoples based upon the coercive decrees of despots would be artificial and not vital; only a fellowship based upon the voluntary principle can have moral value.

Let it be conceded that in a time of confusion and crisis an oligarchy or a dictatorship, independent of popular veto or consent, may be a necessary expedient. It may restore a lax discipline and accelerate the sluggish pulse of government; but a drug that is good as a medicine is likely to be pernicious and demoralising as a food. Only where government rests upon popular consent can the people be treated as free and responsible citizens: only under a government so principled can they be educated in public duty and a sense of obligation and conscience in human affairs: and only under such a government has a quickened popular conscience the power to initiate reform. Outside democracy, the people are forever shut up to the alternative of submission or sedition.

These are not academic considerations. If we regard them as such we have misread history and forgotten the lessons of the past: and it is likely that we have also failed to read the portents of the future. It seems probable that in the days to come we shall see a vast increase in the power of government, so that the entire area of our national life will be collectivized. And this may be salutary. But if the foundations of the new-model State are to be laid, not upon the liberty and consent of the people, but upon the will of their masters, or upon some mystical authoritarianism, or upon some materialistic idolatry of a fixed economic system, then it will be too late to protest: we shall have returned to the age of tyranny. The people will be required to show themselves zealots for a system in which personal values have been cancelled and the individual becomes the commodity of the

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