

Two Baptist Pamphleteers.

THROUGHOUT the history of social progress, sincere men have ranged themselves in two opposite camps. There have been those who, whilst remaining satisfied with the existing order, have attempted to mitigate its hardships and inequalities by private benevolence. William Wilberforce, in all his thinking about social conditions in England, and in his generous support of the work of Hannah More, was typical of those who, whilst practising philanthropy, yet held tenaciously to the status quo. But there have been others, more passionate, though possibly not more sincere, who have desired to refashion society, to alter its economic and industrial machinery, and to mould the world "nearer to their heart's desire." Lord Shaftesbury, another Evangelical, on whose heart and conscience lay the burden of the suffering and the misery of factory workers, chimney boys, slum children and the insane, may remind us of those who desire drastic changes in our social life.

I.

These contrasting attitudes are well illustrated by two nineteenth century Baptist pamphleteers, James Ebenezer Bicheno and John Ovington, the one a middle-class lawyer, judicious, cautious, ever "willing to justify himself"; the other a master printer of Clapham Common. Both were concerned with the problem of poverty, and in the year 1817 both published a book on the subject. Bicheno's book, *An Inquiry into the Nature of Benevolence, chiefly with a view to elucidating the principles of the Poor Laws, and to show their immoral tendency*, was published by Rowland Hunter, of St. Paul's Churchyard. An amended edition, in which the general arguments are the same, was issued in 1824. John Overton, who published for himself, called his work, *The Labouring Man's Advocate: An Appeal to the Justice and Humanity of the British Public respecting the Wages of Labour.*"

In 1817 the economic crisis which followed the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars was at its height. In spite of the Corn Bill of 1815, the price of corn continued to fall, and the farmers who, encouraged by high prices during the war, had borrowed heavily, were now embarrassed as the banks began to call in their money. The intolerable burden of taxation which had increased fivefold prompted so strong an agitation for retrenchment, that

in 1816 the income tax was abolished, and also the tax on malt. In the same year, when the price of corn rose sharply and the farmers ceased to grumble, agricultural and industrial workers revolted against the price of bread. There was widespread unemployment in the North and Midlands, and riots in the Eastern counties, where farm labourers set fire to barns and smashed machinery as a means of agitating for a fixed price of two shillings and sixpence a bushel for corn, and fourpence a pound for beef. These were also the days of noisy agitation for a reform in the system of representation. The oratory of Henry Hunt and the propaganda of William Cobbett stirred the hearts of the democrats. The Spenceans were demanding an equality of wealth by a restoration of the land to the community. When, after much agitation and disturbance, the Prince Regent was attacked as he re-entered the palace after opening Parliament, the government adopted stern and repressive measures, including the suspension of Habeas Corpus, and an Act restricting the right of public meeting.¹ It was in this time of economic upheaval that both Bicheno and Ovington wrote on the problem of poverty.

II.

"An Inquiry into the Nature of Benevolence," begins with the statement that although successive parliaments have passed legislation "in the hope of exterminating misery. . . still vice and wretchedness among the lowest classes are not diminished; and although the more atrocious crimes of murder and rapine are less prevalent than formerly, yet idleness, improvidence, prostitution and the want of integrity are alarmingly increased." There follows the unpleasant comment that the poor, separated from the rest of society by their poverty, "are become an excrescence on the body politic, not receiving its nourishment by a natural circulation, but from an extraneous source which ministers to a continual and growing morbidity." Whilst the middle classes have made rapid progress in mental and moral education the poor who, like the extremely rich, lack "the competition of moral qualities without which no lasting excellence can be attained" have been steadily degenerating. One cause of this is the want of education—in Scotland the more degraded poor are inspired with "unrivalled national morals"—but education alone will not solve the problem of poverty. This brings Bicheno to his main point, a total criticism of the Poor Laws. "The end of education is to promote habits of thought

¹ For a full account see Halevy *History of the English People* (E.T.) Vol. 2, pp. 3-30.

and reflection; to teach the pupil to look at consequences and to limit his desires; to instruct him in the right value to be set upon every pleasure, and to strengthen the moral man to conflict with the animal man. The operation of the Poor Laws is the reverse of all this. They induce sloth, improvidence and a disregard to character, and dissolve those domestic ties which are of the first importance to the rising generation."

Poverty is inevitable. "The distinctions, station, wealth, and poverty of civil life are as reasonable (and consequently are absolutely good) as the other parts of the creation, in which we acknowledge wisdom and perfection to reign omnipotently." There is real value in earning what we get and a powerful stimulus in competition. To sweep away the Poor Laws would for a very long time aggravate the misery—and it is clear that Bicheno was conscious of the misery which poverty inflicts—yet the Poor Laws are founded upon entirely wrong principles. They have developed from a voluntary to a compulsory plan. Almsgiving under the operation of the Poor Laws is an absolute duty without regard to the character of its objects, whereas it ought to be voluntary. Since the amount we can give to charity is limited we must select cases for relief.

Again, under the Poor Laws every human being unable to labour has a right to sustenance. Paley had argued, not long before, that in extreme necessity a man has the right to take without or against the owner's leave, the first food, clothes or shelter he meets with, when he is in danger of perishing through lack of them. This justification of theft in extreme cases aroused all Bicheno's middle-class, property-owning instincts. The destitute, he affirms, have no absolute right to our charity, for that would deprive us of our liberty to decide whether we will help or not. "The language of distress is very properly 'asking', 'begging', 'supplicating', not demanding, insisting or threatening" The Poor Laws say that a man may eat even though he will not work. What then becomes of the revealed law that he who will not work, shall not eat? Following Malthus whom he quotes, he argues that, "it is a universal law of the wise and supreme Governor of the earth that the constant tendency of all animated beings is to increase beyond the subsistence prepared for them." The struggle to exist sets in motion "the spring of civilization and refinement," and therefore the Divine Law opposes indiscriminate relief. "If the course of society were left to flow in its natural channel, and not counter-acted by human laws, provisions and labourers would more nearly find their level, and much less quantity of misery be spread through the aggregate mass."

A third criticism is that under this system every man able

and willing to work has a right to receive employment or the wages of labour, but nothing can "render it obligatory on the part of the capitalist to employ any other servants than those of his own choice." It is scandalous that the attempt to create work by establishing Parish Manufactories should bring increased competition to the private capitalist. Society is now saying to every man, "Whatever your vice or your tendency to multiply it in vicious offspring; however burdensome to society; however you may degrade your own interests present and future—our care for your support shall keep pace with your neglect of it, and we will divide our food with you and your children even to the extent of reducing ourselves to a level with you."

Finally charity ought not to be enforced by legislative authority. Almsgiving is a private virtue. It is a law that the happiness of men shall depend upon their conduct, and this Divine Law is abrogated by the present system. Gradually we must return to the operation of Natural Law, and meanwhile even those laws made by the State for the relief of poverty ought to discriminate between the deserving and the worthless.

III.

John Ovington writes with greater passion than Bicheno, and with a deeper understanding of the feelings and needs of the poor. On the title page of "*The Labouring Man's Advocate*" he quotes the text from Colossians iv. 1, "Masters give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a master in heaven." The theme of the book, constantly quoted, is "oppressing the hireling in his wages." "At present," he writes in the preface, "in every department of society NOT JUSTICE but CHARITY takes the lead. . . . When any of our religious and moral writers condescend to plead the cause of the poor it is to entreat for them *not Justice*, but Charity. . . . But this whole system of what is falsely called Charity must and will be completely destroyed, with the overthrow of the abominable practice of oppressing the Hireling in His Wages: to which it is a natural and necessary appendage."

The principal obstacle to the harmonious and happy state of society described in the scriptures is ignorance, for which the remedy is universal education. "No human being should be allowed to remain destitute of instruction. The means of providing suitable education for his children should be put into every man's power; and no children ought to be employed in any situation or capacity whatever, till they are at least able to read and write." It is the immediate concern and business of

every individual to enable working men to provide suitable education for their children; and to raise them from that wretched state of ignorance and immorality to which they are degraded by their poverty.

Ovington, who was well versed in the Scriptures, now proceeds to quote various texts which support his arguments. I give a selection of these with the author's comments.

"God has made of one blood all the nations of the earth." It is not only illiberal and ungenerous; but unjust and ungrateful in the highest degree, to deprive men employed in productive labour of the advantages of education, and of most of the conveniences and comforts of life. . . . Labour is indeed necessary to cultivate the earth, but God never authorised any to confine labouring men to bare necessities; much less to reduce them to a state approaching starvation in the midst of plenty."

"The command of God is, 'Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the Lord.' Do the patrons of the Bible Society really know that there is such a passage in the book? If they do, how comes it to pass that our aged men are appointed to sweep the streets and scrape the roads, and cry the hour of night round our parishes; and when they are quite worn out with hard labour and hard living are sent to the work-house?" In several places Ovington is sarcastic at the expense of the British and Foreign Bible Society with its array of ecclesiastical patrons, who do not realize the social teaching of the book they are disseminating.

The Speenhamland system comes in for severe condemnation. "When a farmer says to his workmen, 'I shall give you eighteen pence a day for your services: I know that this sum is not sufficient for the maintenance of yourself and your family, but then you must apply for relief to the parish, who are obliged to contribute to your support.' I say, when a farmer thus addresses his labourers, he is not aware that it has the same effect in many cases, as if he had said to them, 'Go and become poachers, lop my trees, pilfer my corn and steal from my farmyard.'"

A minimum wage is absolutely necessary. The sum of twenty-four shillings per week suggested by a writer in the "Monthly Magazine" is certainly too low, because it allows nothing for education and sickness. Especially, must it be a high enough minimum to prevent that "sounding a trumpet before men," the clothing of the children of the poor in a uniform livery, and making them walk in procession through the streets and assemble together in Church to sing the praises of their benefactors. A wages tribunal should be set up in every parish.

consisting of "a competent number of men fearing God and hating covetousness," to judge between masters and their servants with impartiality. It is in line with his whole objection to charity that Ovington should have no use for hospitals. "A gentleman or tradesman of moderate means would not send his daughter to the hospital were she ill. All people of credit would be shocked at the barbarity. Yet these very persons would propose it as a kindness, an act of charity to a poor neighbour to get her daughter or son into an hospital." Indeed, every oppressed class of society demands sympathy, and "whosoever stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself but shall not be heard."

IV.

Many comments might be made on these two contrasting pamphlets. One only I will make. The future lay with Ovington and not with Bicheno. The time for philanthropy and charity was past. In 1816, Wilberforce had tried to revive "the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor." He arranged a public meeting at the City of London tavern at which the Duke of York was to take the chair. Six resolutions were to be put by the Duke of Kent, the Duke of Cambridge, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Duke of Rutland, Lord Manvers, and the Bishop of London. The meeting ended in an uproar, and the Duke of York escaped amid boeing. Future meetings of the Association suffered the same fate.¹ Political and economic reform, Factory Acts and Trade Unions were to supersede Philanthropy and the Status Quo, and since all these movements were to be indebted to the Free Churches, it was fitting that a Baptist, John Ovington, should be a pioneer and a prophet of the new order.

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¹ Halevy, *op. cit.*, p. 12.