

The Church and the Poor.

A SERIES OF HISTORICAL SKETCHES.

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XV.

THE LAST FIFTY YEARS.

IN the previous chapter we saw that for many years very serious attacks, proceeding from different sources, had been made upon the principle of individualism, or non-interference (*laissez-faire*). From about 1870 a general belief in this principle was so far shattered that from this time onwards practically all legislation for the benefit of the poorer classes is inspired by the absolutely contrary principle—that of faith in State interference, otherwise Collectivism. Professor Dicey shows¹ that the acceptance of this root principle has led to a belief in four other subsidiary principles, which have been embodied in legislation with four definite objects: First, the extension of protection; secondly, the restriction of freedom of contract; thirdly, a preference for collective, as opposed to individual action; fourthly, the equalization of advantages among individuals possessed of unequal means for their attainment. The great majority of the Acts of Parliament passed during the last forty-five years will be found to have as their purpose the promotion of one or more of these objects. Under the head of “Protection” will come the Workmen’s Compensation Acts, various Factory Acts, the Sale of Food and Drugs Acts,² etc. Under “Restrictions of Freedom of Contract” we must place certain clauses in the Agricultural Holdings Acts, which prevent the bargaining away of rights by the tenant; also clauses in the Workmen’s Compensation Acts,³ which prevent a workman con-

¹ In “Law and Opinion in England,” Lecture VIII.

² Dicey shows that “Protection” is tacitly transformed into guidance.

Op. cit., p. 261.

³ The number of these Acts are given by Dicey, *op. cit.*

tracting himself out of his benefits.¹ As a proof of the preference for "collective action" we may adduce the Combination Act of 1871 and various Trade Union Acts. The spirit of these Acts, which favour combinations and give Trade Unions a recognized position, is entirely opposed to that of the Conspiracy Act of 1800. As examples of Acts promoting the "Equalization of Advantages," we may certainly quote the various Education Acts, Employers' Liability Acts, and different Acts intended to promote the general health of the community. Further, it should be noticed that this Collectivist legislation is not the production of one, but of both the great political parties in the State.²

The history of the Poor Law during the last half-century is chiefly a history of various efforts to improve its administration, though from time to time attacks have been made upon the principles upon which the Act of 1834 was based, as also to reverse the policy according to which those who framed that Act desired it to be administered. In 1871 all the collective functions of the Poor Law Board, also sanitary and highway administration, and the general supervision of local authorities, were transferred to the Local Government Board.³ Both the powers and the activities of this branch of the public service have, of course, been very largely extended during recent years. One subject which has been much before the public during the period of which we are speaking, and which has provoked a large amount of both wise and unwise discussion, has been the proper spheres, or the different functions, of charity and of the Poor Law. In 1869 Mr. Goschen issued a valuable circular in which it was stated that "it is of essential importance that an attempt should be made to bring the authorities administering the Poor Laws and those who administer charitable funds to as clear an understanding as possible, so as to avoid the double distribution of relief to the same person, and at the same time

¹ "The transition from permissive to compulsory legislation bears witness to the rising influence of Collectivism" (Dicey, *op. cit.*, p. 265).

² Since 1870 Collectivist legislation has proceeded independent of the political party in power.

³ By 34 and 35 Vict., cap. 70.

to secure that the most effective use should be made of the large sums habitually contributed by the public towards relieving such cases as the Poor Law can scarcely reach.”¹ The circular goes on to point out how necessary it is “to mark out the separate limits of the Poor Law and of charity.”² The same necessity is still with us, as is also that of a clear understanding that, according to the principles of 1834, the Poor Law is not framed to deal with poverty, but with destitution. The danger of giving “relief in aid of wages,” both by those who administer the Poor Law and those who give charity, is too often forgotten. If only those who are tempted to do this would study the conditions of the English poor prior to 1834, the danger would be far less than it actually is. This circular of Mr. Goschen’s was probably the chief cause of the establishment of the Charity Organization Society, which was founded in 1869, and which is still active in London and in various provincial towns.

Among other means which have tended to better administration have been the Poor Law Conferences at which Guardians from various Unions meet annually to discuss subjects connected with their various duties.³ These began in 1871, and are now held every year in London and in various parts of the country. So impressed was the Government with their usefulness that in 1883 an Act⁴ was passed allowing Unions to pay out of the Common Fund the reasonable expenses incurred by any Guardian, or Clerk to the Guardians, attending these Conferences.

From about this time we see the beginning of a movement which of recent years has rapidly developed in two directions. On the one hand, we notice an effort to remove from the work-houses three classes of paupers, and to deal with these in special institutions. For the sick we find that Poor Law hospitals or infirmaries are provided; for the vagrants we find casual wards

¹ In 1863 the Rev. W. G. Blackie had read a paper at the Social Science Congress on “The Collisions of Benevolence and Social Law.”

² Aschrott and Preston Thomas, “The English Poor Law,” p. 90.

³ Their originator was a Mr. Barwick Baker.

⁴ 46 and 47 Vict., cap. 11.

are established; while for the children various means are devised, either Poor Law Schools, "Scattered Homes," or a "Boarding Out System," being now generally arranged. On the other hand, as local government has become more efficient, or more paternal, we find that other branches of this service have, to some extent, taken upon themselves functions which formerly, at least to some degree, were discharged by the Poor Law; in consequence of this there has arisen a certain amount of "overlapping," which is inimical to economy of administration. Possibly the most striking instance of this is found in connection with the treatment of the sick. In the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1905 we read: "The continued existence of two separate rate-supported Medical Services in all parts of the kingdom, costing, in the aggregate, six or seven millions sterling annually—overlapping, uncoordinated with each other, and sometimes actually conflicting with each other's work, cannot be justified."¹ Another sphere of State activity in which serious overlapping is in existence is that connected with the care, health, and education of children. In regard to this, the Minority Report asserts "that it is urgently necessary to put an end to this wasteful and demoralizing overlapping by making one Local Authority in each district, and one only, responsible for the whole of whatever provision the State may choose to make for children of school age."²

The winters of 1885-86 and 1886-87 were of unusual severity, and at that time many branches of trade were depressed; consequently, there was much unemployment and also a certain amount of reduction of wages. Unfortunately, many Unions, especially in London, proved unequal to meeting the strain which was put upon them; workhouses became overcrowded, and the tests offered for out-relief were often unsuitable. A great meeting of unemployed—attended, unhappily, also by a large number of bad characters—was held in Trafalgar Square. The Lord Mayor of London opened a "Mansion House Fund,"

¹ Minority Report, 1909, p. 230 (8vo. edition).

² P. 169.

to which an enormous sum of money was subscribed. Those engaged in its distribution proved to be unequal to the responsibility involved. After the crisis was over it was found that the fund had had a distinctly demoralizing effect upon the poorer classes.¹ This led to the appointment of a Committee of the House of Lords in March, 1888, which was "to inquire as to the various powers now in possession of the Poor Law Guardians, and their adequacy to cope with distress that may from time to time exist in the Metropolis and other populous places; and also as to the expediency of concerted action between the Poor Law Authorities and Voluntary Agencies for the Relief of Distress."² In their Report the Committee recognized the importance of adhering strictly to the principles of 1834; at the same time they made certain recommendations which would throw a very considerable increase of expense upon the local Poor Law Authorities. Just at that time a new County Government Bill for England and Wales was being framed. In this Bill³ it was arranged that through the County Authorities certain grants should be made to the Guardians for certain kinds of expenditure. As the result of further Acts, passed in 1890, additional help was given to local Poor Law Authorities; consequently, there is available to-day for the purposes of the Poor Law, besides the yield of the local Poor Rate, a very considerable sum drawn from wider sources.⁴

The Local Government Act of 1894⁵ brought about a very considerable change in the *personnel* of many Boards of Guardians. It largely increased the electorate by which Guardians were selected, and it removed all property qualification for holding the office, which thus could now for the first time be held by a working man. Also by this Act women for

¹ Aschrott and Preston Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 100, 101.

² *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

³ Which became the Act 51 and 52 Vict., cap. 41.

⁴ By the Annual Report of the Local Government Board for 1911-12 [Cd. 3627] the amount of expenditure on relief for the last current year was £15,023,130, of which £2,451,894 came from "Grants and Government subventions," against £11,757,298 from local rates.

⁵ 56 and 57 Vict., cap. 73.

the first time "obtained a firm position on the Boards."¹ It was feared at the time that these changes might bring about a great relaxation of strictness of administration. At the first elections (in 1895), under the cry of the necessity of "humanizing the Poor Law," the Socialists tried in many localities to bring in extreme elements. But actually in only a few instances, and these mainly in large centres of population, did these extremists obtain a majority. In some cases a policy of "liberal," indeed of reckless, giving of out-relief was tried. Even where this took place the Local Government Board did not intervene, though many at the time were surprised at its inaction.² But in the event this policy, on the part of the supreme authority, justified itself. When the rates rose, and that without any corresponding improvement in the welfare of the poor, the ratepayers became indignant and demanded a return to the method of applying the workhouse test, whose usefulness had been tried by a long experience.

Of recent years there has undoubtedly been a very considerable increase of expense in connection with the Poor Law; but, except in comparatively few instances, this has not been due to a more lavish distribution of out-relief, and certainly not of this to the able-bodied. It has been much more largely due to the increased cost and the increased efficiency of administration. In London it has been especially due to the erection and maintenance of costly and exceedingly well-equipped Poor Law hospitals and dispensaries, as well as other institutions for special classes of paupers. In the country generally it has to a certain extent arisen from the appointment of a larger number of officials—Relieving Officers and others—and through appointing those who were better equipped for their work, and therefore were rightly paid higher salaries.

I cannot here deal with the large amount of recent legislation

¹ Aschrott and Preston Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

² The Board actually issued certain circulars giving very plain advice to the Guardians—*e.g.*, that of January 29, 1895, which spoke of the importance of "those who take upon themselves the office of a Guardian, discharging their duties with a due sense of the responsibility which the position involves."

which, though not directly connected with the Poor Law, must inevitably have far-reaching effects upon many who, under other circumstances, would probably have become a charge upon its funds. The laws dealing with Old Age Pensions, with Unemployment Insurance, and with Insurance against Sickness have not yet been long enough in operation for a satisfactory estimate to be formed as to their probable results. They are, of course, further instalments of that Collectivist legislation of which we have had so much in the recent past, and of which, if one can read aright the signs of the times, we are likely to see still further instalments in the future. What the ultimate effects of this legislation will be, he would be a bold man who would venture to prophesy. Probably it will lie midway between the hopes of those who expect it to produce a kind of social millennium, and the warnings of those who tell us that it will inevitably sap the energy and the power of self-effort for which, they say, Englishmen have been so conspicuous in the past.

I must now turn to consider what the Church has done for the poor during this period. Certainly she has given ample evidence of a far more intelligent and practical interest in their needs; also of a far greater sense of responsibility towards improving their condition. She has awakened to the fact that no mere attempts to palliate the sufferings of individuals, or of certain classes of individuals, can be regarded as an adequate discharge of her duty towards the poor generally. We find, at any rate among the more intelligent members of the Church, a growing effort to view what is termed the "Social Problem" as a *whole*. There is an increasing conviction of its unity, without any attempt to deny either its complexity or the interdependence of its many parts. Above all, we see a growing belief that it is unwise to attempt to divide life into separate spheres, to which we may apply such terms as "sacred," "secular," "religious," "material," "economic," or "moral." An analysis which has sometimes been pushed to a very extreme limit has proved the necessity, and not only the necessity, but the possibility, of finding also a synthesis, and that

one not of an artificial, but of a very real, nature.¹ The great majority of thinkers, however differently they may approach the problem, are agreed that the promotion of the welfare of the people, in the widest sense of the term, is the true object of the Church, and that this is an object or a work which demands their best and highest energies. The more carefully they have studied the New Testament, the more surely have they become convinced that nothing which ministers to a true social welfare can be outside the sphere of the activities of the true followers of Christ.

Among the many influences which have tended to produce this change of both view and conduct, none has been greater than that of Bishop Westcott. In 1883 he became a Canon of Westminster; in 1886 he published the addresses entitled "Disciplined Life," and in 1887 the volume entitled "Social Aspects of Christianity." In 1889 he became, upon its formation in that year, the first president of the Christian Social Union. I lay stress on these dates because a glance at a bibliography of Bishop Westcott's published works will show that before the year 1887 very little that he wrote bore *directly* upon the social problem, while of what he published after that date—the titles fill nearly three pages—everything (with the exception of the great commentaries upon "The Epistle to the Hebrews" and "The Epistle to the Ephesians,") has the closest possible reference to it. But though Bishop Westcott did not become a social *teacher* until he was nearly sixty years of age, he had been a close student of the subject almost all his life. In a letter written in 1848, when the French King lost his throne, are these sentences: "I cannot say that I feel any great indignation at the Parisian mob. They had doubtless great grievances to complain of, and perhaps no obvious remedy but to be gained by force. . . . They are indeed fearful times. There is need of a real Church amid all this confusion."² In the

¹ In this we may see a return to the method of the New Testament, where "life" is far more frequently used without a qualifying adjective than with us—*e.g.*, St. John x. 10.

² "Life of Bishop Westcott," vol. i., p. 101.

“Elements of the Gospel Harmony,” written three years later, we may trace the beginnings of the teaching afterwards so fully developed in various directions on many occasions. Here we see his ability to take a wide survey of history, and to show the connection of the parts with the whole. For instance, he asserts that “the best conception of life which we can form is that of activity combined with organization, the permanence of the whole reconciled with the change of parts, a power of assimilation and a power of progress.” Also he states that “Christianity cannot be separated from the past any more than from the future. . . . The Incarnation as it is seen now is the central point of all history. . . . If we regard all the great issues of life, all past history, so far as it has any permanent significance, appears to be the preparation for that great mystery, and all subsequent history the gradual appropriation of its results.” From that time onwards the meaning of the Incarnation seems to have been the central subject of Westcott’s study, as, later, the applications or issues of the great doctrine became the basis of all his social teaching.

Seventeen years later was preached the first of the three “Addresses on the Disciplined Life.”¹ Here he showed how we may learn from the spirit of the leaders of the past, but that we must not copy either their methods or the details of their practice. Speaking of the Rule of Benedict of Nursia, he says: “Henceforth the law of social life was to be sought in self-devotion and not in self-indulgence,”² and finally he asserted that “history teaches us that social evils must be met by social organization. A life of absolute and calculated sacrifice is a spring of immeasurable power.”³ I give these extracts from his earlier works to show how long the Christian solution of the social problem was seething in his mind.

But it was in the “Social Aspects of Christianity” that he first definitely dealt with the subject. The preface to this book

¹ In Harrow School Chapel, in 1868; reprinted in “Words of Faith and Hope.”

² P. 9;

³ P. 14.

should be carefully read, for it is at once autobiographical and prophetic. He confesses what he owes to Comte's "Politique Positive," which he had carefully analyzed twenty years before, and also to Maurice's "Social Morality," of which he writes: "Few books can teach nobler lessons, and I should find it hard to say how much I owe to it, either directly or by suggestion." In 1890 he became Bishop of Durham, and in 1891 he delivered the well-known speech on Socialism at the Church Congress at Hull.¹ In this he states: "The term 'Socialism' has been discredited by its connection with many extravagant and revolutionary schemes, but it is a term which needs to be claimed for nobler uses. It has no necessary affinity with any forms of violence or class selfishness or financial arrangement. I shall therefore venture to employ it . . . as describing a theory of life and not only a theory of economics. In this sense Socialism is the opposite of Individualism. . . . Individualism and Socialism correspond with opposite views of humanity. Individualism regards humanity as made up of disconnected or warring atoms; Socialism regards it as an organic whole, a vital unity formed by the combination of contributory members mutually independent."²

In the following year the subject of Bishop Westcott's first charge was "The Incarnation a Revelation of Human Duties."³ In this we come to the very heart of his social teaching, and that the doctrine of the Incarnation was its chief inspiration is here made perfectly clear. The following extracts are typical: "The Incarnation of the Word of God becomes to us, as we meditate on the fact, a growing revelation of duties—personal, social, national."⁴ "We are required to prove our faith in the wider fields of social life."⁵ "As this age has been an age of physical science, so the next is likely to be an age of social science."⁶ "The Incarnation . . . hallows labour and our scene of labour. It claims the fullest offering of personal service."⁷ "For us each amelioration of man's circumstances is

¹ Reprinted in "The Incarnation and Common Life." ² P. 225.

³ Also reprinted in "The Incarnation and Common Life."

⁴ P. 43.

⁵ P. 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ P. 47.

the translation of a fragment of our creed into action, and not the self-shaped effort of a kindly nature."¹ I could quote many more such sayings, but these will be sufficient to show how much we owe to Bishop Westcott in bringing the deepest truths of the Christian creed to bear upon what must be everyday efforts of social duty.²

The first official recognition on the part of the Church of England of the importance and urgency of the social problem occurred, I believe, at the Lambeth Conference of 1888, when the Conference asked that "some knowledge of Economic Science should be required of Candidates for Holy Orders," and when Archbishop Benson, in the Encyclical Letter, stated that "no more important problems can well occupy the attention—whether of clergy or laity—than such as are connected with what is popularly called Socialism." The subject occupied a much more prominent position at the following Lambeth Conference in 1897, when it was dealt with by a special committee, which published upon it a lengthy report. In 1903 a Committee of Convocation was appointed to consider the same subject. The result of its deliberations was an excellent report entitled, "The Moral Witness of the Church in regard to Economic Questions." At the Pan-Anglican Congress of 1908, the section which dealt with "The Church and Human Society" evoked the widest possible interest. At the third Lambeth Conference, which immediately followed the Congress, the social question was again regarded as probably the most important of all the questions debated. Two of the six resolutions passed upon the subject must be remembered: No. 45 runs, "The social mission and social principles of Christianity should be given a more prominent place in the study and teaching of the Church, both for the clergy and the laity." No. 47 states that, "A committee or organization for social

¹ "The Incarnation a Revelation of Human Duties," p. 49.

² There is an admirable appreciation of Bishop Westcott's social teaching and work in Bishop Talbot's "Some Aspects of Christian Truth," pp. 303 *et seq.*

service should be part of the equipment of every diocese, and, as far as practicable, of every parish."¹

Of recent years much excellent work has been done by various voluntary societies which have not only attacked the social problem as a whole, but also certain definite problems, more or less closely connected with poverty, from a definitely Christian point of view. The earliest of these societies, the Guild of St. Matthew, was founded by Mr. Stewart Headlam in 1877; but possibly from its extreme socialistic, and still more extreme High Church, views, it has never had a very numerous membership. By far the most important of these societies, and the one which has exerted the strongest influence upon social reform, by exposing social abuses and urging the amelioration of social conditions, is the Christian Social Union. It has been fortunate in enlisting among its officers men of exceptional influence, and who consequently have been able to claim not only a wide hearing among the more thoughtful members of the community generally, but a careful attention from those in a position of high authority in the State. Its three presidents have been Bishop Westcott, Dr. Gore (the present Bishop of Oxford), and Dr. Kempthorne (now Bishop of Lichfield), while Canon Scott Holland has from the first been the chief influence on its executive committee, and indeed the main driving force of the society. It has published an extensive literature dealing with almost every detail of the social problem in all its many branches. Perhaps the strongest proof of its influence lies in the fact that it has formed the model for all the various societies established by other Christian "Churches" to work upon similar lines towards the attainment of the same objects.

As the Christian social worker looks back over the last hundred and fifty—indeed, over the last fifty—years, and then considers the immense improvement in public opinion which has taken place in reference to the problems of poverty during

¹ The Reports of the Lambeth Conferences and the pamphlet on "The Moral Witness of the Church" are published by the S.P.C.K.

this time, he may indeed thank God and take courage. But if he is truly thankful that this public opinion is very different now from what it was even half a century ago, he is not therefore blind to still existing evils. He knows how much there is to be accomplished before all have even that "equality of opportunity" which, surely, should be their right. But the Christian social reformer can certainly now feel that at the present time "organized Christianity" is making its voice heard and its influence felt as never before. That this is chiefly due to a more intelligent perception of the meaning of the Christian Creed, and to a more practical application of its principles, there can be no doubt. The hope of a further improvement in the welfare of the poor lies in the true meaning of Christianity being still more fully understood and the responsibilities which a profession of Christianity should involve being more efficiently discharged.

