

The Church and Social Reconstruction after the War.

ANYONE who in the midst of a great war is invited to speak of the social reconstruction which is to follow it, can hardly avoid using the opportunity to advocate reforms in which he has himself most interest. Such a crisis in the history of the world as this through which we are passing compels us all to face problems which we usually leave to others.

In the matter of reconstruction, indeed, it might be urged that, while the issues of the war are still in many respects uncertain, it is too soon to think of it. Let us wait and see how we are placed at the end of the war and what it is that we have to reconstruct: things will probably go on very much as before.

Yet with some of us the great fear is lest they should: lest our boys and our men should have died for their country only to keep it as it was. For many of them no doubt that aim was incentive enough—England's worth dying for—England as she is. But many, we know, thought more of the England that is to be, and hazarded their lives for the sake of ideals from the realization of which the England that is is still far off. Yet they had faith in her, and the blood with which many of them have sealed it must surely have some redemptive power for the country for which they died.

I cannot use the language that calls this war a Judgment of God on the Nations: but war is a great probation for all the peoples that engage in it; and the people that is not made better by it, that does not emerge from its searching discipline, purified, is worsted in the struggle, even if "victory" rests with it.

It is true I suppose that war itself can never be Christianized. Nor I suppose can a pulpit or a steam engine. But both may be used for beneficent ends. And war may have a Christianizing power, and in the world as it is it may be the only means by which Christian ideals can be upheld. The nation defeated in war may, indeed, have the better chance of being Christianized; for Victory may go far to destroy the soul of a people, and crushing defeat to bring it to life. Yet peace may be at least as unchristian as war;—the forty

years of peace which our enemies have enjoyed were not wholly used for Christianizing ends.

When peace is again restored will they, and shall we, succeed in making it Christian ?

That is the question which we have in mind when we speak of "the Church and social reconstruction." Throughout the British Empire, with only individual exceptions, in all classes and groups of men and women we have seen spring to life a spirit of readiness for service and sacrifice on behalf of the Empire and its ideals, which is in its range and intensity, I suppose, the most splendid witness to the central idea of Christianity that the world has ever known.

People speak of men and women having been ennobled by the war. Rather, I think, they have shown in the crisis what they really are: and they have shown, whether they know it or not, how deeply, into the core of the life of our race, has penetrated the teaching of the Cross that it is in service and sacrifice that man comes to his true life.

If then we ask what part the Church is to play in that reconstruction of society which will be needed after the war, we must answer "that part which whenever she is true to her mission she always plays in the world."

As to the means which she should use, there has been in the course of her history difference of opinion and difference of practice, but I think that at no time would her most true representatives have doubted that her chief business in the world is stated in our Collect for the third Sunday in Advent—so to prepare and make ready the way of Christ, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at His second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in His sight.

There we have the three great convictions by which the action of the Church in relation to Society must always be controlled:—the first the conviction that there is a divinely purposed order, to which the present order of the world does not correspond, which will at some future time be established; the second the conviction that this order, which is called the Kingdom of God, is based on eternal principles of wisdom, righteousness, and love which were manifested in the teaching and life of Jesus Christ; and the third the conviction that the mission of the Church is to keep alive the hope of this order

in the world and win men to it, so that whatever other differences divide them, the whole race of mankind may become as one people united in following out one law of life.

These three convictions express the Christian hope, the Christian ideal, the Christian duty, in relation to Society.

There have been times when the Church as a whole has seemed to lose heart and to let her convictions fade away. She has despaired of the realization of the Kingdom of God in the world and treated this life as only an education for individuals for an eternal life hereafter. That is, no doubt, a belief with which she can never dispense ; a belief without which the pain of the world—the hope of young lives cut short—the frustrated endeavour—“ the height that proved too high ”—would be an almost unbearable anguish. But it is not a belief which tends to make the world itself a better place and the conditions of life in it more like the conditions of life in the Kingdom of God. And whenever this hope of the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth has faded from the consciousness of the Church, she has compromised her ideal of social righteousness and narrowed her duty to the world, abjuring her mission of social renovation.

She has been content to accept things as they were, and it is notorious that she has so acted that to-day she is widely regarded as ranged on the side of the established order as the Church of the well-to-do, the squire, the lady bountiful, the landlord, the employer—as the Church of the powerful governing classes.

Yet she ought to be always trying to move forward to the goal of her faith.

“ Christianity ” always directs us forward, to the future, to the new order that is to be : and it does not allow us to be content to dream about it as men have dreamed of Utopias, which they never supposed to be attainable. It tells us that our very salvation depends on the measure of our success in fashioning our lives, as nearly as possible in all the circumstances of our times, according to the standards of life in the Kingdom.

Generation after generation we are born into a complex social system which is only partly Christianized, which is never stationary, but always in movement. New opportunities, new dangers, are constantly arising through the incessant flow of human activities and interests in the world as it is. Intellectual, moral, industrial

economic conditions are always changing; and every change of conditions presents new problems to be solved, new material to be Christianized.

It is the duty of Christians, of the Church, to be always seeking the most Christian solution possible. It is true that the most Christian solution possible at the moment may often wear the drab garb of compromise: sometimes a bolder faith or a more sensitive conscience and a finer wisdom, more widely diffused, might have found a more Christian way: We have to take the world as it is. As we look back on the history of the Church, it is easy to be wiser than our forefathers. At least in our own time, when indeed we are at cross-roads, let us try to take the way which tends to the Christianization of thought and life. And if we are to take it, we must face the facts of life as it is and free our minds of the unchristian idea which has constantly numbed the conscience of those of the Church's members who should be her leaders—the faithless and fatal doctrine that the order of the Kingdom of God is not the ideal for this world.

Many of those who could have done most in the past to uphold the ideals of the Kingdom in the social life of our country have been hypnotized by the unchristianized prepossessions of their class, and in large measure victims of the conventions by which the facts were concealed—the conventions of “polite society” which the Church has not disturbed. To-day we are at least half-awake. To-day the veil is drawn aside, and we must deliberately shut our eyes if we are not to see. Our very boys and girls know more of the conditions of life than men and women have known in the past. They know that underneath the fine flowers of pure and dignified service and high character is a sub-soil of impoverished and stunted lives and conditions inimical to health of body and of mind. And the best of them revolt from a social polity which, while it produces the high development of the few and the respectable level of morality and comfort of a small middle class, leaves masses of the people, by whose work and services they benefit, subject to conditions which are a disgrace even to our “civilization.”

It is the present state with which we have to deal: and in recent years many a scheme for social amelioration, by general consent regarded as good and even urgently needed, has been abandoned because it would cost a few millions a year.

Yet the money spent in a couple of days of war would have been enough, and what we are spending in a month would have gone far to transform our slums and crowded cottages, and to give a living wage to the victims of sweated labour in town and country who are exploited not only by their immediate task-masters, but by us all. I say, exploited by us all—for in the economic conditions in which we live it is impossible for us to trace to their origin the things we buy and use, and so impossible for us to avoid becoming “partakers in other men’s sins.”

For this reason, if for no other, it is incumbent on the Christian to concern himself with “social questions.” He cannot stand aloof and disclaim responsibility for unchristian conditions on the ground that he had no hand in making them, if he is, however remotely, getting advantage from them and if he has any power to help to make them more Christian.

This is not a plea for “righteousness by legislation,” but rather for “legislation by righteousness,” for more of the spirit of Christianity in government in all its forms: and more recognition of the fact that the only moral authority which is effective in a modern state is that which is embodied in legislation. To the mass of men the Law is the standard of Right.

The business of the Church is to do all it can to secure that every child born into the world shall have throughout his life as good a chance as possible of growing to the best of which he is capable, viz., a full-grown man—or, in St. Paul’s words, of attaining to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

And so it is the Church’s business for example to take thought—according to the knowledge of the day—for the health and education of the mother and the child that the child may have life and have it abundantly. It cannot ignore these things because epileptics may be good Christians and the dividing line between saintliness and insanity has, sometimes been thin.

We know that man does not live by bread alone, and that fine character is not the creature of comfort, nor yet of the kind of education which the reformers of the seventies expected to herald the millennium. We know that clean houses don’t make clean minds. And we have good reason to suspect that if the control of “capital” was in the hands of “labour,” commerce would still be as much “without conscience” as it is declared to be to-day. One

“ class consciousness ” would be replaced by another, for the material benefit, no doubt, of a larger number than before, but not directed to the interests of the community as a whole.

Just as one class consciousness is beginning to fade away—the class consciousness of the well-to-do who have been in possession of power, it is met by another new-born and rapidly acquiring strength and force, that threatens to manifest itself just as selfishly in our common life.

The suspicions that “ labour ” has shown in the last few months are, I believe, abundantly justified by the policy of “ capital ” in the past : and the cry for the “ conscription of wealth ” in the interests of the State is a just demand in exchange for “ conscription of men,” though much less easy to bring to effect. These suspicions and this demand are the natural result of the state of civil war which has existed between “ capital ” and “ labour ” through the long years of international “ peace ”—a state of war that capital avows as frankly and unashamedly as labour.

Even under stress of the Nation’s War and imperative necessity, it is not peace, but only an armistice, that can be arranged. If the Nation’s Peace, when it comes, is to be Christianized at home, here is one great sphere for the operation of the central principle of Christian ethics that each individual person is an end in himself, not to be exploited in any one’s interests,—and of its corollary that only in service to the community of which he is a member can the individual person realize himself.

It has been said that the Church cannot take sides in industrial and economic controversies. Rather it is true that whenever a moral issue is involved, the Church cannot be neutral. The Pope by his avowed neutrality in the war, and his refusal to form a judgment on the morality of Germany’s treatment of Belgium, has perhaps done as good service to the world as harm to the Papacy. For like the Germans themselves he has shocked the moral conscience of mankind, and brought home to men the fact that it is the business of the Church of Christ to champion the afflicted and wronged, to resist injustice in any form, to denounce wrong-doers, to insist by all means in its power on the supremacy of the Christian moral law above all the alleged interests of the State or any group of men.

In our social reconstruction in England after the war there will be no room for the false idea that the Church of England must

be "neutral" in the rearrangements between "capital" and "labour" that will be inevitable, or in any of the settlements of questions that affect the moral welfare of the nation. It will be difficult, no doubt, as it constantly is, to establish the true proportion between rights and duties on which the Christianization of Society depends. But at least the mind of the Church and its activities must be steadfastly set against all unrighteous conditions that exist in the world, whether in trade and commerce, in domestic or international politics, or in the more personal and private relations of daily life.

And any system, or any detail of a system, that keeps one human soul in subjection to another, is unrighteous. No system is Christian in which there is schism in the body and the members do not have "the same care one for another."

We are fighting our national war against a spirit that is truly described as anti-Christian, because it denies to the soul of other nations the right to live and grow which it asserts for its own soul. It claims that right for itself alone. We can see how monstrous the claim is when it is thrust on us as it were in the bold headlines of a placard that spell out the rise or fall of the empires of the world.

But we shall not have learned the lesson of the war, or the duty of the Church of England to the people of England after the war, unless we determine to banish from our national and civic and private life as much as possible of the Prussianism by which it is infected.

The dominance of class over class, sex over sex, employer over employee, landlord over tenant, private and personal interests over the interests of the whole community in any shape or in any sphere,—this kind of dominance is anti-Christian in essence and in its working. And, only if the Church can set itself unreservedly to eradicate this kind of dominance of one over another, only then can it lead in the great movement towards a better human society, purer and less selfish, juster and more generous, organized for righteousness and the protection of personality, which instinct as it is with the spirit of Christ, whether with or without the Church's help, is certain to be one issue of the war.

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