

Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

BY THE REV. F. J. TAYLOR, M.A.

SALVATION AND SOCIETY

IT is curious to observe in a recent authoritative discussion of the origin and development of a Christian social conscience and of Christian social thinking in England that the hoary old legend of Wilberforce's indifference to the white slavery at home is given fresh currency. The remarkable fact is that Wilberforce and his associates were not content, as less able and far-seeing men might well have been, to regard the prolonged and exhausting struggle against the slave trade and negro slavery as exempting them from any responsibility for the state of England. Quite apart from their religious activities, which over a period of years wrought a wonderful change in the moral and social aspect of society, the members of the Clapham Sect gave themselves continuously to social and political work which was designed to better the lot of their fellows in every way. It is not true to assert, as Mr. Maurice Reckitt does, that Wilberforce suffered from "a total lack of imagination as to the situation of the great majority of his fellows in the new industrial civilization." He was acquainted through the work of Bernard and Dale with some of the worst conditions of factory life, and gave his support to their efforts to secure better factory conditions by some measure of regulation and by attention to the health of the workers.

What is remarkable in a leader who could rightly be called other-worldly in his outlook, is the wide range of his interests and the comprehensive interpretation he gave to his duty of raising the level of human existence as a whole. The provision of education for all (he supported and subscribed to the work both of Dr. Lancaster and of Mr. Bell), the reformation of public manners, the curbing of vice and extravagance, the mitigation of the ignorance and misery of the new proletariat, as well as the suffering of the negroes—all received his attention. He would be a bold man to maintain with Mr. Reckitt in the face of this and other evidence (provided by M. M. Hennell in the *Church Quarterly Review*, January 1947) that Wilberforce and the Evangelicals had no notion of social justice as a fulfilment of God's will for His world when all this varied work was carried on from the impulse provided by a saving knowledge of God.

Mr. Reckitt himself acknowledges in the closing pages of his book *Maurice to Temple* that modern sociologists are increasingly finding that their social concerns cut across the political alignments of left and right but he does not seem to realise that Wilberforce was confronted by the same difficulty. His passionate desire to help the helpless was in order that they might find their true destiny in God, and therefore he was obliged to define his own position as very different from that of Owen and Cobbett and the believers in progress by the

machine. But he was prepared to work with those whose assumptions were very different from his own in order to achieve specific reforms, and in parliament there was something like a working alliance between the Benthamite radicals and the saints for this purpose. Indeed, the work and spirit of the saints elicited the outspoken praise of Bentham. Mr. Reckitt appears not to realise that the sarcasm of Cobbett and others at the expense of Wilberforce and his friends was part of the abuse common to political speakers outside parliament when dealing with men and policies not of their own party.

The social achievements of the early Evangelicals have often been described, and are particularly impressive when their small numbers are recalled. Sociology is a modern development, but at their best the great evangelicals had a profound sense of social duty and addressed themselves to the problems of the day both in parliament and in the smaller spheres of their parochial charges. John Venn at Hereford with his steam corn mill, St. Peter's Literary Institution and Industrious Aid Society was not unique in the efforts made wherever opportunity served. The tragic thing is that the energy and insight of Evangelicals after the middle of the nineteenth century was steadily diverted into other channels in the struggle over the Bible and the Prayer Book, until the next generation came to have an almost pathological fear of political and social action as an attack on the sufficiency of the gospel of the grace of God. But when Evangelicals have plainly lived by the power of the Cross they have possessed a profound social concern which has been productive of immense social improvements. No one can claim to stand in the Evangelical succession without realising that social duty is an authentic part of that tradition.

REVIVAL IN FRANCE.

PROTESTANTS in France have always been a tiny minority in the nation, although not infrequently through distinguished adherents they have exercised an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. Some like Pastor Marc Boegner and Mlle. Suzanne de Dietrich have become well known figures in the oecumenical movement. At the present time, despite the wounds inflicted by war and German occupation, the French Protestant Church is manifesting a virility of spirit and a revival of intellectual and liturgical interests which are as significant as the powerful liturgical movement and the philosophical offensive in the Roman Church. The voice of Karl Barth has awakened an answering echo and there is a revived concern with dogmatic theology and an almost aggressive return to the sources of Calvinist thought. But the somewhat rarified atmosphere of the review *Foi et Vie* nevertheless reveals a determination to discover what ought to be said to this generation in the light of what the great reformers said and in unwavering obedience to the biblical Word. There are not lacking attempts to grapple with the challenge of modern society and to give direction in the problems of the spiritual life.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Protestant activities is the publication of the newspapers *Réforme* and *Témoignage Chrétien*.

Both these journals, though probably facing greater material difficulties and possessing fewer resources than their English counterparts, yet demonstrate a width of understanding and a critical awareness of contemporary issues far beyond the level of most religious papers in England. There is a sustained attempt to expound and interpret the news of the day from a Christian perspective, ranging over such themes as the devaluation of the franc, publicity and propaganda in Russia, army service, agricultural problems, and contemporary literature. Each issue contains an article headed *Le Culte*, dealing clearly and constructively with some aspect of church life like baptism or preaching, while the wholeness of an authentic Christian witness is indicated by valuable critical notes on the cinema, the theatre and the radio. In this way these papers are contributing towards the emergence of a genuine reformed doctrine of discrimination. A church which is able to maintain such a high standard of journalistic enterprise is clearly alert to the needs of the hour and may have much to teach its neighbours in better circumstances.

PENETRATING THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

IN any large city it is certain that the size of congregations and the numbers of young people attached to the church will show a steady decline as the investigator moves in from the residential suburbs to the older and shabbier districts near the centre. The down-town church is an all too familiar phenomenon since the end of the first world war, yet as a rule it still exists in the midst of a considerable population, which with few exceptions shows itself indifferent to the existence of the church. Dr. John Baillie has declared his conviction that the break-up of the traditional pattern of life caused by the Industrial Revolution is chiefly responsible for the present plight of the church. The cleavage between the church and the workers is so great that there is a common tendency to expect that a working class parish will have a small congregation and an impoverished life. A prolonged continuance of this state of affairs will have very grave consequences both for the church and the workers. The common structure of the world's life is built upon the labour of the workers, and their modern self-consciousness makes them a strategic force in any community. A Christianity which is hardly known or practised by this large and influential section of the people will be seriously defective in its expression, while for their part the workers will only have a distorted outlook and lack the experience of the wholeness of life.

Christian penetration into this field should be a priority governing all thinking and planning, and stimulated by a passion to see the church indeed the Body of Christ—the Divine Worker—and the masses of the people no longer deprived of their birthright. This is hardly to be achieved by the customary round of church life and activity, since this appears to be concerned with what are judged to be sectional interests apart from life as the workers know it. The Iona Community, which has already shown a remarkable evangelical initiative to which there is as yet scarcely anything comparable among

evangelicals in England, has sponsored a Christian Workers' League as an instrument for bringing the one Christian truth into the lives of the workers and for helping them to realise the true meaning of Christian existence in the modern world. A pamphlet (*The Christian Workers' League*) describing its object and methods has recently been issued and is marked by a sober estimate both of the possibilities and of the difficulties of the task.

Three comments may be allowed on this project. First, it is not an attempt to use a political interest as a piece of bait to catch those who would not otherwise be interested. Nor is it an attempt to exploit religion for social ends, still less to repudiate the very proper earlier evangelical insistence on personal religion. But it treats politics as a necessary part of the whole life of man, which is never lived in a vacuum but in a particular environment which must influence in all kinds of ways both thought and action. Secondly, it is firmly founded upon a personal Christian discipline of prayer, Bible reading and worship. The interdependence of work and worship is clearly expounded and resolute Bible study underlies all its thinking and action. Thirdly, it is designed to enable the members to understand the meaning of personal existence in a world of mass techniques and of taking personal responsibility. Branches are to be run by workers themselves, since in the end the working class can only be won by those who are within the working class and one with them. Senior and more experienced members of the church are to give help as advisers, not directors, and so to discharge a unique pastoral task. This might well become a fine way of eliciting the right kind of pastoral concern among many church members by appealing to the human importance of their special knowledge and experience. Moreover, the aid of those senior advisers will build the work of the league into the whole life of the church and prevent the growth of any exclusiveness on the part of young workers. The task of the branches is to see the truth of the Bible and the facts of the present situation—to judge the inadequacy of present conditions and aims in the light of the facts and to undertake action designed to improve conditions of life and work. Self-criticism on the part of the workers in the light of the see-judge-act method (adopted from French Roman Catholic workers' organizations) is an essential part of procedure. In this way young men and women can see Christianity at work, penetrating into every sphere of life, and can themselves have a share in that work. This is a movement to watch and to imitate.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL IN OUR AGE

A BARRIER almost as effective as the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe seems to separate the majority of English people in this generation not only from active membership in the church but from many of the fundamental Christian assumptions. It is not that most people have deliberately rejected Christianity but that in their hurried modern life it has been crowded out. A growing majority of the people has not ceased to go to church but has never been there. The superficial level at which so many people live in a mechanised

society makes them almost entirely dependent on external stimulation, which so far as Christianity is concerned only certain types of streamlined evangelism can supply. But unless Christians are content to abandon their claim that the Gospel is for all men and for every situation in life, the task of trying to win these kindly disposed but largely unchristian masses must be carried on.

An unprecedented situation calls for new methods and changes in the way of preaching to people who have virtually no religious ideas and not even half awakened religious feelings. To bleat about the old simple gospel or to believe that a re-assertion of the old ways will enable us to meet the challenge of our time is to be blind to the real difficulty of evangelism in the modern world. "Themes that are eternal are not themes that have to be put eternally in the same words." It is the post-Christian paganism which is the formidable difficulty confronting the evangelist of to-day, and provided that he never loses sight of the fact that the sovereign love of God may act to save men in the most unpromising circumstances, he would be wise to take careful account of the situation to which he must now preach. He must, in fact, both preach the Gospel in a contemporary idiom and also devise a long-term policy lest his preaching be suspiciously like the deliberate casting of seed on stony ground.

In a most refreshing and stimulating little book *Evangelism and Education* (S.C.M. Press, 6/-) Professor T. E. Jessop, who played a great part in the development of padre's hours and other forms of adult religious education in the forces during the war, argues that the long term policy of the evangelist must be the religious education of those who received little or none worthy of that name in their childhood. The fallow ground must be broken up and the soil prepared before much of the seed can be sown or fruit be gathered. So, slowly and sympathetically there must be a building up "of the neglected ideas, emotions, interests and values that make the problems and solutions of religion intelligible." Most of the triumphs of nineteenth century evangelists were gained because these ideas, emotions and interests were still active, albeit to a feeble extent, in many people.

The book does not venture the claim that padre's hours and other co-operative methods of religious education have had considerable success, but the point is emphasised that the success or failure of those methods must be reckoned by the extent to which the work is carried on by the civilian church. It assumes that Christianity is absorbingly interesting and that anybody who lives by Christian faith finds it so absorbing that he can, for that reason at least, interest others in the clues it offers to the solution of human problems. In teaching Christian truth we have not only to understand the thought forms of those we address but also to take into account the three qualities of the adult mind, an experience of life, judgment of what is practicable, and some measure of self-control and responsibility. Any reader of this book who supposed that he would find in it a recipe for successful evangelism would be speedily disillusioned; but if he has confidence in the truth of the Gospel, let him proclaim it in ways adapted to the twentieth century mentality. Frequently the debate between those who seek to defend old-fashioned methods and

those who seek to pioneer new ways of approach is unreal because the two disputants have a different gospel. But when the apostolic Gospel is known and believed men are not wedded to fixed procedures but ready to display the initiative of those who are led by the Spirit of God.

THE DESERT THAT IS GERMANY

THOUSANDS of English people through months of service spent in Germany since 1945 have helped to make their fellow countrymen aware of the grim judgment that has overtaken that once proud land where, to reverse the words of the prophet, there is ashes for beauty, mourning for the oil of joy, and the spirit of heaviness for the garment of praise. The bitter comment of Tacitus, "they made a desert and call it peace," often hurled at them in recent times, might well be on the lips of Germans as they face their conquerors. Probably no one has done more than Mr. Victor Gollancz, a Jew, to press home upon the conscience of the Christian Church in Britain the duty of aiding our former enemies in their distress and to insist that this is a test of our own moral standards. In a pamphlet *Reconciliation* he has returned to this theme, and no one can ignore the very great importance of supplying food, clothing and books to the needy. But there is a lurking danger that those things will be interpreted as the principal content of Christian duty.

The present occupation of a large zone of Germany has committed Britain to the rebuilding and maintenance of a community the very structure of whose life has been completely shattered. Mr. Robert Birley, lately headmaster of Charterhouse and now serving as educational adviser in the British zone of Germany, has in his recent Burge memorial lecture (*The German Problem and the Responsibility of Britain*: S.C.M. Press, 1/-) emphasised that the divine word "man shall not live by bread alone" applies to Germany in defeat as well as to Britain and America. This gives an added importance to the educational work being undertaken in Germany with the assistance of British advisers and points to the fact that in the end Germans must be responsible for the recovery of their own country. But they need help which can really be described as missionary help from those who will be prepared to go and live in their midst and enable them to find answers to their problems and rediscover faith in life.

ESCHATOLOGY AND THE ATOM

BOOKSELLERS have already reported a noticeable slump in the demand for books which expound the significance of the atomic bomb. Public curiosity and anxiety seem for the moment to have waned. Perhaps it is a sign that the creeping paralysis of fatalism has gained a firmer hold on the masses, for the threat to human existence remains as serious as ever. There is as yet no indication that the nations are finding a way to control this terrible weapon they have fashioned. Frightened scientists and publicists continue to

turn to the church for help, but the answers they receive are neither particularly helpful nor profound.

In the first of a new series of divinity lectures on an ancient foundation at Lichfield Cathedral, the Rev. D. R. Davies has addressed himself as a Christian publicist to the task of providing an answer to this call for help. His lectures, published under the title *Theology and the Atomic Age* (Latimer House, 5/-), follow the familiar pattern of his thought and language. Readers who are already acquainted with his writings will not find anything new in these pages, which contain more of the atomic age than of theology. It is a pity that a certain verbal exuberance leads Mr. Davies into wild and indefensible statements—"Power is vicious at all times"—"The slime of statistics befouls the whole of social life"—and into epigrams that sound witty but do not adorn what professes to be a serious contribution to theological thinking.

The analysis of historical development is too superficial to be of much value. It simply will not do to assert that "medieval man never questioned the idea that God was central both in history and nature," and to speak of the decisive change inaugurated by the Renaissance, without any more serious examination of the necessity of the Renaissance and the sterility of later medieval Christianity. Any attempt to speak responsibly to the present age must include a just estimate of the solid achievements of the centuries since the Renaissance and of the necessary autonomy of spheres of life which the medieval church strove to keep under its control. There is a double dialectic in history, prefigured by the parable of the wheat and the tares. Further, a more careful appraisal of power and its function in human society is plainly required. At times Mr. Davies seems to come dangerously near to exploiting the human predicament in the interests of theology. If modern man and his scientific and philosophical leaders have great need of repentance, so also has the church and its theologians.

The attempt in the last chapter to draw out the eschatological significance of the bomb is a curious amalgam of prejudice and loose writing. Mr. Davies underestimates, perhaps because of the form of his own experience, the power of belief in the Parousia, but apart from criticising churchmen and sectaries alike, does not really make clear what he believes or what Christians ought now to be saying to scientists and politicians. Moreover, we look in vain for what seems to be the central emphasis in the New Testament and in the biblical work of Prof. C. H. Dodd, that the Parousia is a final redemptive act of God from beyond history to conclude the historic process. Such an act will involve judgment, but it is essentially a final revelation of love and mercy, not of outraged dignity. Is the survival of civilisation a matter of deep concern to the church, or is it not? If so, what action should Christians undertake immediately? Have Christians anything more to say to a frightened world than the sombre warnings of the scientists who produced the bomb and understand its menace? These lectures of Mr. Davies would not lead us to suppose that they have such a word.