

COLLECTIVISED CHRISTIANITY

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THE WANING INFLUENCE of Christianity on human conduct must disturb many people who, whatever their religious views, value the standards of Western civilisation. That civilisation, as it developed, was strongly influenced by Christian ideals, however defectively expounded on many occasions. If the teachings of Christianity could be effective at that time, the question arises why does it fail to be effective today? Church leaders themselves are complacent and appear to think that all the situation requires is to seek shelter beneath the same umbrella, to stage pop music in churches and to endorse those collectivist views which, as they have been increasingly accepted, have coincided with evidence of progressive decay in character and institutions. People are justified in judging religious as well as other ideas by the words, “by their fruits ye shall know them.”

It is difficult to imagine how on some occasions in the past, suffering people have looked to Christian principles as protection against the injustice of their rulers. In the days of Wycliffe and John Ball, when the Bible first began to circulate among ordinary people as distinct from the intelligentsia and ruling circles, interest in Christianity became too lively for the comfort of the chief priests and governors. To be reassured that the earth was the Lord's bounty to all men and not the monopoly of landlords; that the Author of all natural laws could not be outwitted by rulers, however clever, and that societies which try to improve on the will of God must expect tribulations—these must have awakened much discussion among the yeomen and craftsmen of the time. They must have thought that those texts meant what they said and that to do as you would be done by and to respect the rights and earnings of others equally with one's own, should refer to the rulers as well as the ruled. When the peasants rebelled against oppression they asked: When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman—the person privileged to live on the earnings of others?

History shows that insofar as the conditions of the natural order are respected, thought and knowledge advance themselves to a higher stage of individual development. But modern Church leaders never consider how people might be enabled to rely entirely upon their own efforts.

If one imagines a band of aggressors falling upon a

free society, history easily suggests the methods they would pursue to gain their selfish ends. The first step would be to seize the land, the source of all things, and, by charging rent, live at the expense of others thus impoverished. As developing society required a fund for public purposes, an arbitrary levy would be imposed on people's earnings, leading to further impoverishment. Thrift would be penalised and difficulties would arise in industry and trade leading to demands for monopoly power; the value of earnings would be further reduced. Poverty would become obvious and clever people would devise elaborate schemes to alleviate it. But would not the simple, honest Christian support the demand that justice be done and freedom be restored so that all received the natural reward for their exertions obviating the need for elaborate schemes to protect them?

But more recent history shows that politicians do not start from such principles. Instead, accepting the *status quo* of injustice, they impose further taxes on earnings so as to obtain a fund from which they can distribute relief to the poor both directly and indirectly, so concealing poverty that people think the problem is solved.

Monopolistic maladjustments in industry and trade are “solved” by similar methods of subsidies and privileges and are operated by an instrument called economic planning which, as it remains a mystery to the general public, can violate any principle of freedom or honesty without being called to account. No distinction between public and private property is recognised and individuals, feeling less and less responsibility for their thoughts and actions, regard themselves only as units in a collective body. The effects on character and even on intelligence are obvious.

Faith in this combination of expedients, which is fostered by state education and the mass media, makes the recognition of any higher form of law almost impossible. If politicians and experts can devise a providence that is superior to that which is part of the nature of man, then they must be wiser than God.

Yet Church leaders do not seem to be aware of this stumbling block to any honest mind who seeks in Christianity some guide to how mankind might be raised from present corruption to a higher condition. For all the social evils that exist, they endorse more

and more welfarism. Thus Christians, led by collectivist-minded clerics identify the message of Christianity with fashionable opinion and state compulsion. Already in Scandinavia the Churches are subsidised by the state, and clergymen, like other government officers, form trade unions to promote their special interests. Protestant Christianity which was once identified with independence of thought and character seems destined to fade out as a subordinate department of the welfare ministry.

This "with-it" interpretation of Christianity is not new in religious history. An outstanding example occurred when the French revolutionaries nationalised the Church. Then many dignitaries discovered that their views, like those of the Vicar of Bray, happened to have changed at the same time. But while the Talleyrands and Fouches rattled their way to power and wealth, humble village priests, even under persecution, remained true to their old fashioned ideas. And today in Britain isolated clergymen sometimes protest against the collectivist views of the higher ranks.

It is encouraging to notice that in America the protest has gone further; it has recognised that Christians, instead of accepting as gospel the dictates of economic experts, should themselves study economic law, and the Revd. E. A. Opitz of the Foundation for Economic Education has made a notable contribution. Amongst other literature, some laymen publish the bi-weekly, *Christian Economics*—although one might question the inference that a science requires moral endorsement.

These American Christians expose the economic absurdities of what is called socialism or leftism, but tend to forget that criticism is not enough. Opponents might say that their object is only to protect capitalism, a vague word that they associate with exploitation. The real question is what was and is the cause of unnatural poverty which induces people to accept these absurdities because they see no alternative.

The evidence points to monopoly, beginning with land monopoly, as the cause, but as society develops another factor must be considered: taxation. Historically the British and American people have preserved their liberties by refusing arbitrary taxation. They no longer resist it but if a just principle of taxation were generally recognised they might do so. Governed on a just fiscal basis and being allowed to reap the full rewards of their labour, people might develop a greater sense of self-reliance. With this would come the self respect and the respect for others that accord with the message of Christianity.



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