

THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

A Record of the Progress of Single Tax and Tax Reform
Throughout the World.



THE RELATION OF THE CHURCHES TO THE SOCIAL PROBLEM ❁ ❁

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(Expressly for the Review.)

Humboldt, in his great and remarkable essay on "The limitations of the activity of the state," holds that "the true goal of man is the highest and most harmonious development of the faculties." The individual problem, therefore, is this: "What must a man do in order to succeed in reaching his true goal?" And this is the social problem: "What must society do to make possible the success of each and every individual who strives towards his true goal?"

What are the conditions for the successful solution of the individual problem? What conduct will assure to a man the highest and most harmonious development of his physical, intellectual and moral talents? They are plainly twofold in their nature. One condition lies wholly within the individual. The individual must endeavor to develop his faculties by his own exertion, he must work; labor to strengthen his physical powers, reason to enlarge his mental gifts, serve to practice his ethical inclinations.

The other condition lies entirely without the individual, resides in his environment, which should be such as to give him the greatest possible freedom to exercise his powers. For the development of his physical powers the individual must have free access to the physical universe, equal access with all others to the physical world so as to insure to him the full product of his labor. This will insure him leisure for intellectual work and expansion, and it will also remove external incentives, temptations to vice and create about him a healthy field for the exercise of his altruistic leanings. That is to say the individual should live in an environment of freedom limited by the equal freedom of all others, in an environment of equity, of justice. To secure for the individual this environment of justice is the office of society. The doing of this is the solution of the social problem.

* *Vide*, back pages of this magazine for sketch of author.

What is the aim of the churches? Whatever be the differences between the several denominations, between the several organized bodies of men banded together for religious purposes, they have this in common, that they all strive for the moral betterment of men as individuals and for mankind as a whole. The Christian prays: "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And the Jew thrice a day expresses the hope, that we might speedily behold the time when the world will be established under the kingdom of the Almighty, and when all the wicked on earth shall have been turned towards God. And they both pray: "Lead us not into temptation." If this be their prayer and their hope then the goal of their endeavor must surely be the establishment on earth of a reign of righteousness.

Society is an abstraction, a relationship, a phenomenon, a nonentity, and has no real existence. It has no mind to be elevated, no soul to be saved. The souls to be saved are individual souls. The objection may consequently be raised that the church, or the churches, having nothing to do with society, that the individual is their sole concern; that the prayer for the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth merely expresses the wish that all individuals might be saved and that the term "kingdom of heaven on earth" stands for the time when the salvation of individuals shall have become general.

This objection is valid to a certain extent. The aim of the individual must ever be his own salvation, to become holy, to become perfect. The "Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" of the Old Testament and the "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" of the New, are commandments to the individual. Yet while it were wrong to say that the holy life, the perfect life of the individual is impossible in a society which is not based on righteousness, or worse, which is based on unrighteousness, it is at the same time quite plain that in such an environment individual salvation becomes extremely difficult and almost impossible. In Sodom not a righteous one remains. Thus, though it be admitted that the churches' chief concern is to bring about the salvation of the individual it is at the same time clear that without the establishment of a reign of social justice the salvation of the individual becomes practically impossible; the establishment of such a reign must, therefore, be the foremost concern of the churches. (The ancient Jews clearly saw this; thence the legend that among the seven fundamental laws revealed to Adam and confirmed to Noah was the one enjoining on every being the duty to assist in the establishment in the community of just government and that whoever does not so assist is deemed unworthy of Life everlasting, of being saved.)

The objection brings into stronger relief the similarity which does exist between the aims and the solidarity which should exist between the activities of the churches and of society in its secular aspect, i. e. governments. Their respective perfection, nay, even their very existence or organizations, are not aims in themselves but are aims only for an end: As the real reason of existence of the churches is the salvation of individuals, and the churches are merely one of the means of individual salvation, so also is the real *raison d'etre* of government not an end in itself but merely a means, *the* means, to secure the environment which is to make the highest and most harmonious development of the individual possible. It is almost a work of supererogation to sum up the foregoing by saying that the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth hoped for and striven after by the churches is identical with the solution of the social problem aimed at by secular society, and that the relation of the churches to the social problem may be defined by saying that the solution of the latter is, under a different name, the chief aim, professedly, of the former.

But the churches do not act in accordance with their professions. There are, indeed, a few Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, Jewish rabbis and a

goodly number of laymen in the churches who, in their individual capacity, seek to bring about the reign of righteousness in the society of men. The churches as such, though they teach children to pray : " Thy kingdom come ; Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven," not only neglect to do anything that is of any value towards the making true of the wish, rather do they all in their power to uphold established wrong and to entrench it more firmly every day.

Only one instance need be cited to prove that this assertion is well founded. The very first requisite for the introduction of a reign of righteousness of the kingdom of God on earth is the theoretical recognition and the practical establishment of the right of all men to the equal use of the universe. It is through the use of the earth that man uses the universe, that he breathes the air, that the red blood courses from his heart through his body, that he eats, that he drinks, that he thinks and speaks, that he basks in the warmth of the sun, enjoys the sheen of the moon and admires the twinkling of the stars, it is through the use of the earth that he lives and moves and has his being : Prove to a man that he has not the equal right with all other men to the use of the earth and you have proved to him that this world is not governed by justice and by mercy ; prove *that* blasphemy and you have proved to him that other—that the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is a myth ; prove to him that blasphemy and you have proved to him the arch blasphemy : that there is no God.

Has any church ever done anything to uphold the right of all men to the equal use of the earth ? Is any church doing anything in behalf of the theoretical recognition and the practical assertion of this fundamental right ? Are not all churches found rather on the other side of this question, if not actively then, at any rate, passively by their silence ?

The ancient Jewish commonwealth (one might call it church) recognized the right to the equal use of the earth by theoretic statement and by legal enactment. There is no proof, though, that the law of the jubilee was ever carried out in practice. On the contrary, in the Talmud it is stated that the nationality of Israel was lost on account of the non-observance of these very laws. How clear was the vision of these rabbis of the Talmud !

No church is known that has ever upheld this primary right of man, no church, at any rate, to-day does assert that right. The head of the Roman Catholic church has directly asserted the right to private property in land and thereby denied the equal right to the use of the earth ; although it should be said that the same church has since declared that the theory of the equal right of all men to the use of the earth is not contrary to its doctrines. The other Church which also claims that name par excellence and calls itself Catholic, the English church, is directly committed against the recognition of the equal right to the use of the earth, else how could a score of its prelates hold seats in the English House of Lords ? But it is invidious to specify : Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants are very much alike in this that through their churches they are not asserting the equal right of all men to the use of the earth, and that they are not condemning the opposite theory and practice. In this one respect as in several others the churches have not yet done anything which might show that they understand what is their true relation to the social problem, simple and close though that relation be ; indeed, it seems plain that they do not understand that by assisting to solve the social problem they would be working at the solution of their own : that of the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.