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An Old Church in a New Age

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The Christian Council of South Africa.

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AN OLD CHURCH IN A NEW AGE.

My subject, in one or another of many forms, is a common one to-day, perhaps a hackneyed one. On the bookstalls you may find it in several disguises, sometimes alarmist, like Middleton Murry's *The Betrayal of Christ by the Churches*, sometimes pacifist in outlook like Laurence Housman's *The Preparation of Peace*. In your periodicals you will find echoes of it in such headlines as "The Creed in the Crisis" or "Christian Institutions on Trial." The frequency with which it is discussed is a symptom of an unappeased hunger in the human heart; the divergence of the views expressed is an index of the lack of unanimity about means of satisfying that hunger.

THE CRISIS.

He would be a bold man to-day who would deny that there is a crisis. If we are not now living amidst world-shaking events, language has lost its meaning. If we apply any of the tests of a stable and free civilization to these present times, surely they must fail to reach any standard that may in reason be applied. Over the greater part of the land surface of the globe to-day migration is restricted, and what there is, is dangerous, and the same is true of the ocean. We had no sooner attained to mastery of the air than we were compelled to relinquish it again except for those on military duty bent. Other ages have spent long years in building, we waste few moments in destroying. The pictures, the sculpture, the books of earlier and happier times, we have hid in dungeons, and few have the leisure or the composure to create more. Industry is concentrated on the art of destruction, directed thereto by Science and inspired by Religion. The normal

rule of law is suspended in the most tolerant States, free speech is curbed, and the exercise of the most ordinary duties restricted. The Democracies are fighting for freedom, but that freedom is future and not here and now, for special care must be taken when the neighbour's house is on fire. *Proximus ardet Ucalegon.*

It would appear, then, that we are witnessing a fairly complete breakdown of not only *Christian* institutions but all institutions that man has devised for his closer settlement on the face of the globe. We prate of international law, but no such law is observed unless it be in the form of the *lex talionis* as when the embassy of one State is held captive till it can be exchanged for the embassy from the other belligerent, a practice which demonstrates with finality that the reign of law does not exist. We delude ourselves if we imagine that the conventions which still survive as vestiges of a chivalric age, as when opponents are accorded the honours of war, have any basis in recognised international law, or would not be equally easily disregarded if military or diplomatic requirements demanded.

THE CAUSE OF OUR DISTRESS.

Such being the state of affairs the next thought is to look for the scapegoat, for no human mind, however low in the scale, is prepared to accept the present disasters as uncaused. In the great society of mankind a condition such as we are experiencing at the present time must be the result of some operative cause, or concatenation of causes, and if we can isolate the cause, or chain of causes, we shall be somewhat on our way to the understanding and mastery of the situation in which we find ourselves. It is here that the physicians disclose such discrepancies in their diagnosis. Some lay a finger on faulty economics, a man's pocket being a tender part of his anatomy and liable to react with emphasis to touch. Others blame either effete or novel systems of government, and imagine that all will be well if crowned heads fall, or if peasants

rule, regardless of the fact that a self-appointed monarch who was once a peasant can be as warlike and as arbitrary as any hereditary one. Others again fall upon the priests and churchmen, and either blame them for being too influential in the affairs of men, or for not being influential enough. *Quot homines tot sententiae.*

It may well be that the cause of our distress is manifold, and that no one element in society is to be blamed in and by itself. But that does not absolve each element from self-examination, and we who claim to be members of the Christian Church and supporters of its institutional life must also lend ourselves to the process, of which indeed by theory and practice we claim to have more experience than most other groups.

THE CHURCH AND ITS CRITICS.

The Church as an institution does not lack critics, probably never has, and possibly never will. So long as man himself falls short of perfection, an organization which claims to have a perfect rule of life will reveal discrepancies between its theory and practice, and so lay itself open to charges of lukewarmness, or even hypocrisy. An organization which claims to make a universal appeal may and does find itself bogged in a morass of national and racial differences, until it becomes impossible to trace the unity in the diversity. Even within the same race and the same nation cleavages appear along major or minor lines of doctrine, and differences of form and habit develop, some of which have arisen by accident in the course of history, whilst others reflect the differing degree of emphasis which it is possible to employ on a complex theme. All these varieties of pattern make for interest and enrichment, but they make great and individual demands upon the common resources, they dissipate energy, and they require most elaborate organization for their effective co-ordination. If carried to excess they become ludicrous as we are painfully aware in this country of South Africa,

WHAT IS THE CHURCH ?

When we talk about the Church then, we may think of it as the small group which provides a home where the individual soul may be at peace from itself and the world, in which it may grow by communion with God and through knowledge of Jesus Christ, and in which through grace it may attain to the state of "just men made perfect." But we may also think of the Church as a great instrument for the redemption of society, as one of the oldest of all organizations enabling man to live in community and at peace with his neighbour, as the conservator of the social virtues by which alone any community can hold together, and by fidelity to which it refashions itself after the pattern which has been found to withstand the fires of experience and history.

In both of these roles the Church is exposed to attack and is attacked, and that both from within and without.

THE MEASURE OF OUR FAILURE.

We Churchmen may at once admit that much of the criticism which we meet with is well-founded. *We* know that in the most unexpected places we may come upon the white flower of a blameless life, an experience that rewards the traveller upon life's dusty highway with a glimpse of divine beauty ; but we also know and deplore that our own lives fall far short of the beauty which even we desire for them, and we suspect that, as our own often are, many lives are but little touched by the spiritual glow of devotion to the Lord of all life. So arise doubts and fears, envies and jealousies, and the whole gamut of unlovely vices which disfigure our intercourse with our fellow men. It is our shame that such things should make their appearance in our church life as well as in the community at large, and their presence there is the measure of our failure to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. But faulty as the Church of Christ may be in this regard, we do not see any other group or assembly which comes within any range at all of fostering the quality of life which we know the Church can

evoke when its members are true to its mission in the world. The lives of the saints, both ancient and modern, once known, are too vital to be forgotten ; and altogether more numerous by far than have been recorded. In very truth they, being dead, yet speak. Their sound is gone out over far lands and nothing can gainsay their testimony. Every fragment of the visible Church has nourished them and no one fraction can claim a monopoly of their allegiance. They have displayed marvellous similarity in the pattern of their lives, and an equally marvellous disregard of the unessential differences that have gone to distinguish them from their fellow Christians of other habits of devotional practice. They supplement one another in the degrees of their progress to perfection, and some coming after them have been able to combine their diverse excellencies. So long as the outward mode of their behaviour in the Christian way has not withdrawn attention from their pilgrims' goal, no harm has been done, and our common life has been enriched and beautified by theirs. Is there not a thrill in the worship of our fathers' God according to the practice of our ancestors, of which no one need feel ashamed, and no one envious, provided we remember that these things belong to the form and not to the spirit ? There may be manifold appearances of essential unity, there may be diversity of gifts, but there is only one Lord.

It is, however, in its other aspect as a social entity that the Church to-day comes in for most criticism. The eye scans the horizon and nowhere is there peace ; every man's hand seems to be against his neighbour, and order, as apart from force, is nowhere to be found. The nations are milling round and round and round, and groups of peoples seek to impose their will on others. Whole families are blotted out, or what is worse, left with a single representative, and Herod, if he were to come again, would be shamed. In a ceaseless search to discover the cause of this vile consummation of the historical process, even the irreligious become theologically-minded, and upbraid the Christian Church, if not for causing it, at least for failing

to prevent it. "The insuperable obstacle between the common man and Christ to-day is the Christian Church," says Middleton Murry. No indictment could be more strongly framed, for what is the purpose of the Christian Church if not to bring men to Christ? That is the only reason for its existence, and if it were moderately successful in its appointed task, there is no denying that many of the worst vices of our time would disappear; there would be goodwill, which seems at the present time to be lacking; there would be good faith, which is publicly proclaimed to be non-existent in vital relationships; there would be joy and peace, in place of suspicion and hatred and fear. If all men were of good will there would still be matter for debate, for the organization of the community is not self-evident, even when intentions are good, but the debate would be on the plane of reason, and the final arbiter would be essential truth as discerned in a concrete instance. We need not fear then that life and thought would necessarily be insipid if we ceased to enforce our arguments with bombs.

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY.

Without, however, accepting the myth of a common man agape for religion confronted by an unsympathetic church (for I fear that it is as much a myth as the "gentle savage" of the 18th century) we church people may well examine ourselves and our organization to see why it is that apparently the kingdom of God on earth has failed of fulfilment. It is not that the aim is over ambitious and on that account to be abandoned, for every day we pray as we were taught, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Christ must have believed it possible of realization though *we* hear on all sides that human nature does not change, meaning that we are still compounded of the ape and tiger. We *know* that human nature can be changed and innumerable instances of the change of the individual are recorded in experience and history; the community is more difficult, admittedly, but

even here organized groups of men have been known to display the lineaments of a Christian society over long stretches of time and in widely separated places, as for example, the Society of Friends and other branches of the Church known to us. Why then have the political groupings of men become such uneasy antheaps? Christ likened the gospel to the leaven that leavened the whole lump. Has the leaven been too little for the task it had to accomplish? Or has the lump grown larger? On the face of it, it is a pitiable confession that the combined wisdom of man over unlimited time has been unable to evolve a sane, to say nothing of a satisfactory, mode of community life. Yet it is so, for even those communities that are apparently at peace are torn by internal dissension and endless, intolerant discussions, threatening ever and anon to break out into open strife.

One great difference of course between the political group and the Church nowadays is that to a very great extent the association in the former is necessary and in the latter voluntary. Freedom of movement from one political group to another may for all practical purposes be said to be non-existent to-day, and within the group, even in that where rule is exercised with the consent of the governed, there is not much that is enjoined without the backing of a physical sanction. The Church on the other hand is a free association of members, bound only by a common allegiance to a Divine Person, an allegiance which is expressed in an agreed code of observances and duties, and based upon a doctrine founded on that Person. It is a higher organism than a State, just because it depends upon free will, and is to be prized like the apple of the eye because force in any form is foreign to its nature and destructive of its influence in the world. How slow we are to learn that continuance depends in the long run on consent, that unless we *win* people we cannot hold them, and that the weak have more patience than the strong! All compulsion therefore, be it physical or derivable from position, must be absent from our church life, and in this

regard the Church must be a forerunner of the State, the model of that community where love is the unerring law, where no man says to his neighbour, "Do this" or "Do that," but all are self-impelled to justice, goodness and truth.

THE FRUITS OF SUFFERING.

Do you not think that, judging by our experience of human affairs, something will come out of these present trials which will lead humanity as a whole to a higher plane? In the fires of war truths known but only half-realized burn themselves into our souls, and not into ours only, but into the common consciousness of mankind. I feel certain that the force displayed in war fails to accomplish anything permanent: but this immense suffering of the peoples of the earth cannot pass without working either some reformation or some degradation in the mind and soul of man. How many crosses are there on lonely hills in these days, in the squares of our great cities and in retired valleys? Has humanity no heart, or has it no head? Does such suffering make no appeal, or do we see no way out of the net in which we are enveloped? Must we be fatalists for ever as to the possibility of enduring peace? Are the ruined churches of Europe a real loss, or will their absence never be missed, as the ruined abbeys of Scotland have fallen out of the mosaic of the lives of the people?

From our knowledge of the working of social causes we can be sure that the forms in which our lives will express themselves will differ from what they have been. New slogans will be sounded and new names given to old dogmas; old groupings will disappear and fresh combinations will arise; emphasis will be laid on varying aspects of man's social life and these will differ from the emphasis that we have laid on material things. But when the old world has rocked a bit it will find its equilibrium about the poles of life and thought that do not move.

AFTER THE CONFLICT.

Now, even if we have confidence that sanity will return to masses of men, even as we must believe that there are many people just as sane as ourselves; even if we believe that the way of life which we proclaim and try to follow is the only way that will bring peace either to the individual heart or to the social group, the political combination, or the world; even if we are satisfied that the Gospel has had free course through the Church throughout the ages (and many are not so satisfied); even if God has not left Himself without witnesses in our dire day and generation, and Christ has seen of the passion of his soul and been satisfied (and of this many are doubtful); even then, I say, there is a duty laid upon the faithful to ask what the Church of which we are members is going to do when confronted with the chaos into which the world has fallen.

Our lives are being lived out in times of elemental change and passion, and no one but a fool would venture to display a blue print of even a moderate section of the course of events in the immediate future. It is not for us to know the times and the seasons. But two thousand years have left their mark upon society and the world, and if they have witnessed untold aberrations of the pilgrims of time, they have at least shown up, and confirmed our faith in, some characteristics of the Eternal. What these are we learn from one another by interchange of experience.

THE GOSPEL AND THE INDIVIDUAL.

We believe therefore that the good news of the first apostles is still good news and that the name of Jesus is the power of God unto salvation to them that believe. This is not a magical belief though the results of it are in the most literal sense miraculous. The apprehension of this truth by the individual soul, and its application to the concerns of daily life, have been so demonstrated and recorded in countless instances that no further justification is required and we may be assured that wherever and whenever the message is conveyed with conviction, it will never fail of its

saving power. There is no new gospel for an old church in a new age, but only a more vital, more convincing proclamation of an old gospel which has wrested itself free from the accidents of the historical process which have accumulated round it during its progress from the first century to this. We shall have to speak in the accents of the new time, with the emphasis born of the ordeal which the world has had to endure ; we shall have to convince the widow who has been deprived of husband and children by one blast of a bomb that this is not in the nature of things and so intended by God, but the result of the Devil gaining control of the thoughts and actions of men. We shall have to live the life we teach, strong in the belief that *so* we shall best teach it. We shall have to re-proclaim the fundamental doctrines of the immortality of the soul, of the divine wedded to the human in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of men, and of the personality of God. The Church is the nourisher of the faithful and while some rare souls may find their choicest communion with God apart from any visible church, the majority of mankind must continue to renew their spiritual life by means of the bread broken within the precincts of the Church. So it has been : so it must always be.

THE CALL TO UNITY.

But what shall we say of the second aspect of the work of the Church ? We have had a revelation of the unregenerate state of society which must have shocked all who retained a vestige of reason, to say nothing of morality. There is a unanimity about the forces of evil, brought about by their exploitation of the startling results of human genius for their own nefarious ends, which has left standing the forces of good. I do not for a moment suggest that their victory is other than temporary, but I do suggest that the possibility of disturbing the peace of the world which has been allowed them, has fallen to them by the supineness and disunion of the forces of good, especially as organised in the churches. And now we are con-

fronted by a world which is looking for guidance in every and any direction, and no man knows from which side will come the remedy for current ills. Is there any unanimity in our attack upon this chaos ? Does any one regiment of the army of the Cross know what any other is doing ? Is there any co-operation or singleness of aim ? If we stand outside the Christian Church to-day and regard its competing sects, we may understand its divisions by reference to long past history, but can we condone them when seen over against the task that the Church with all its united strength and powers should be engaged in ? Our fathers were not afraid to make new beginnings to confront new situations as they appeared and should we be of less courage than they ? It was their fateful task to divide in order to conserve certain aspects of Christian truth which they believed to be fundamental in their day : is it not like to be our task, in face of a blatantly non-Christian world, to draw together in a new synthesis the scattered fragments of a church which must again be unified in order to redeem from its own folly and wickedness a unified world ? Let us be different if we will, but let us recognise that the things in which we differ are as nothing, are as the small dust of the balance, in comparison with the great affirmations that we claim to be able to make in common, and let us act as if we believed it.

OUR TASK IN THE NEW AGE.

Again, shall we continue to limit the Kingdom of God by shutting our eyes to the tasks that await our hands in the society in which we must live ?

We are the greatest organization in being for the welfare of mankind (that is if we disregard those disabling divisions) but have we always thought as we should of the whole life of man as falling within the compass of God's vision ? The Church may take credit for some social work of great value, especially in connection with the young and the sick and the aged poor. It has founded schools and orphanages, hospitals and homes of refuge, and it has begun a mighty

work in the raising of the Native masses from the darkness of heathendom. But there are great areas of our common life which have not been examined or interpreted in the light of the Gospel of Christ. This plague of war is one of them; another is the adequate housing of the people; another is the insecurity of life through unemployment, insufficient wages, sickness or death; another is intemperance; another is social and economic justice as between various sections of the people. It is a mistake to think that reforms will only be brought about by pressure of government; reforms which are permanent come most easily when the will of the people is disposed to them, and how can the people learn to be so disposed unless they be taught? Great movements towards better living cannot be brought about merely by good-will; they must be first wrought out in thought and with much debate; but this cannot begin to take place until there is goodwill; until, that is, men learn to look at life with the eyes of Jesus. That is where we members of the Church have our opportunity, and that is why all the consecrated thought, all the spiritual insight, all the passionate devotion, all the stern conviction that men are endowed with or can acquire, must and shall be brought to the ministry of the Word that is to be effectual for the salvation of man and the redemption of his society.

So there is a double duty on Christians, not only in these times but at all times, first to practise the way of life and then to proclaim it. Though the outlook may be dark it is not dark to him that believeth. Hear what the modern prophet (T. S. Eliot) saith:

The lot of man is ceaseless labour,
Or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder,
Or irregular labour, which is not pleasant.
I have trodden the winepress alone, and I know
That it is hard to be really useful, resigning
The things that men count for happiness, seeking
The good deeds that lead to obscurity, accepting

With equal face those that bring ignominy,
The applause of all or the love of none.
I say to you: Make perfect your will.
I say: Take no thought of the harvest
But only of proper sowing

The world turns and the world changes
But one thing does not change.
In all of my years, one thing does not change.
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.

O weariness of men who turn from God
Turning from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm
For nation or race or what you call human ty,
Though you forget the way to the temple
There is one who remembers the way to your door:
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community
And no community not lived in praise of God.

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