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# *The Christian and Class*

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NO one denies that class distinctions exist in this country. And although it is a frequently expressed opinion that these distinctions are rapidly disappearing in the face of a conformist culture, what evidence there is points rather to the opposite conclusion, that more rigid classifications are emerging, and in particular that the cleavage between the middle and working classes, that is, non-manual and manual workers, is becoming more marked.

In *The Status Seekers* Vance Packard outlines several pressures which are making for a more rigid society, among which we may mention: the increasing difficulty of 'upward mobility' in one's job; specialization in education; the fragmentation of skills; the growth of bureaucracy; growing isolation of workers and management; union-inspired job-demarcation. This is written of the United States, but the same tendencies may be seen at work in British society. In a series of BBC talks on social inequality in twentieth-century England (printed in *The Listener*, July 15, 22 and 29, 1965) W. G. Runciman concluded that 'such narrowing as there has been in the inequalities of economic class, status, and power between manual and non-manual workers and their families since the first world war has on the whole been less than has been supposed by many people. . . . There has, certainly, been a narrowing; but there has not been anything like a fusion either between, or for that matter within, to two main divisions.'

To wonder about the Christian attitude to class is not therefore an exercise which will soon be otiose and so need not be engaged in too seriously. Rather it is an activity which is perhaps going to make an increasing demand on the Christian conscience as Christians apply themselves in the spirit of the Hebrew prophets to the social injustices of their time (and there are signs of a re-awakening among evangelicals of the social concern evinced by their philanthropic evangelical forebears).

If class consciousness means the being aware of class distinctions, or even the realization of one's own rung on the social ladder, class consciousness is no sin, but a Christian virtue, for it is an honest appraisal of one of the facts of life. Yet there must be many Christians who have felt at times that their class consciousness often goes a great deal further than the mere intellectual understanding of a social situation, and that their attitude to the class structure and to other classes than their own stands in need of some re-adjustment, of some specifically Christian re-orientation.

## CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES

What Christian principles, then, might be thought to be relevant to the problems of class?

On the one hand, there seems to be in the New Testament a general taking for granted of the institution of class; the Christian is simply exhorted to live a godly life within the framework of his society. Slaves are encouraged to 'be obedient to those that are your earthly masters' (Eph. 6:5);

' those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brethren' (1 Tim. 6:2). Christians in general are to be 'submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient' (Tit. 3:1), and should make 'supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings . . . for kings and all who are in high positions' (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Within the household (Col. 3:18-20) and within the church (1 Tim. 5:1; perhaps 1 Cor. 12:28) there is likewise a hierarchy which involves distinctions of status. Nevertheless, it is worthy of observation that this acceptance of the social order by the first century church does not absolve the church of later days from the duty of constantly judging the social order in the light of the word of God. A tautologous example is the institution of slavery, which was regarded in the first century as part of the social structure *within* which Christian principles should be applied, but recognized later as an institution *to* which they should be applied.

On the other hand, beside the acceptance of the class system, there is a wealth of biblical evidence in favour of a more liberal attitude to class distinctions than seems to prevail in Britain today. The creation of man as the image of God (Gn. 1: 27), a dignity which belongs to man as such without distinction between regenerate and unregenerate (Jas. 3: 9; 1 Cor. 11:7), the common descent of men from one primeval pair (cf. Acts 17:26), and the doctrines of individual responsibility as preached, for example, by Ezekiel (ch. 18) would point to a certain equality of men before God. The universality of the gospel, to be preached to all creation (Mk. 16:15), the cosmic scope of the atonement (1 Jn. 2: 2; Col. 1: 20), and the need of divine forgiveness which is common to men of all kinds (Rom. 3:19, 23) have a similar significance. Another approach lies in the principle of 'not judging according to the flesh', that is, according to purely worldly standards (2 Cor. 5: 16), and in the insistence that ' the Lord looks on the heart ' (1 Sa. 16: 7), with the implication that the righteous man does likewise. The brotherhood and solidarity of the members of a society are stressed especially in the Old Testament, where also the concept of corporate action and responsibility is an underlying theme; but in the New Testament also it plays its part in the Pauline doctrine of the solidarity of the human race 'in Adam', and of the redeemed ' in Christ ' (*e.g.* Rom. 5: 15-18).

## PRACTICAL ISSUES

In addition to these theological ideas there are certain practical issues, raised by the church's missionary responsibility, that are of relevance here. It is often lamented, for instance, that the churches are making very little impact on the working classes; this is doubtless largely because of the middle-class affiliation of the majority of church members and leaders, and any relaxation of the barriers between the classes is therefore to be desired in the interest of the spread of the gospel. Similarly, the middle-class dominance of the churches has had certain unhealthy effects upon their life; middle-class notions of respectability and conservatism have tended to cramp the dynamic and sometimes outrageous behaviour which is the fruit of the Spirit. In more than one town the enthusiasm and finally the faith of converted ton-up boys has withered in the presence of the middle-class prejudices of church members.

In summary, the Christian ethic, while not necessarily inimical to the

concept of class, lays stress on the mutual dependence of members of a society, universal human needs and problems, and the equality of men before God. On the practical level also we find that social barriers are a hindrance to the spread of the gospel. Thus although at this point in history it does not seem to be a Christian duty to attack the class system as such (though a few hardy spirits born before their time might well begin taking a cool Christian look at it), we ought, in the name of Christian charity, respect for our fellow men, and concern for the diffusion of the gospel, to allow all the social barriers for whose upkeep we are in any way responsible to fall into disrepair, and to provide no materials for the reinforcement of walls of partition already standing.

## WAYS IN WHICH WE OFFEND

Let us finally examine four respects in which we often offend against Christian ideals in the sphere of class relations.

1. *Occupation.* If all members of a society have a useful function in that society—and dustmen, shop assistants, bus conductors, and plumbers certainly have—is it Christian, let alone reasonable, to feel or act superior to other members of the society simply on the ground of their job? Yet few of us do not at times assign people to their 'place' when we discover their job, almost invariably giving more respect to the doctor than the coalminer, to the professor than the schoolteacher. Is this not a social injustice, that human beings who are worthy of respect from one another in virtue of their common humanity, should be deprived of respect because of their occupation? This is not to argue for a doctrinaire equality of status, but on the basis of the distinction suggested by W. G. Runciman between praise and respect, we may maintain that while all men are worthy of respect regardless of their job, some are more worthy of admiration and praise because of their job; this involves inequalities of status, but not of respect.

2. *Social and cultural life.* The various classes have their own customs in eating and drinking, fashion, home decoration and ornamentation, leisure activities, attitudes to children, relatives and neighbours, modes of behaviour at weddings and funerals. It is very human to disparage what is different from our own way of life simply because it is different, and to invent arguments to sustain our prejudices. What makes this attitude so widespread and so difficult to shake off is that each class can point to virtues and values of its own which are demonstrably superior to those of other classes. But it would be strange if most of the virtues belonged to one class; in fact they do not, and it is sometimes enlightening to discover that middle-class disparagement of lower-class life can easily be matched by working-class contempt for their 'betters'. The Christian responsibility, indeed the responsibility of every liberal-minded and humane person, is to seek out the values and ideals of classes other than his own, and to enquire whether he might not have more to learn from the rest of humanity than to teach them. Middle-class life, for instance, might well be enriched by an injection of some of the traditional working-class virtues such as good neighbourliness and family solidarity (especially where aged relatives are concerned). A trivial example, but one which for me epitomizes the folly of class prejudice, is of a young couple who suffered many sleepless and broken nights at the whim of their infant largely because a dummy was a too unsupportably

working-class object to have in the house.

3. *Accent.* 'We must record the fact that an English person, on hearing another speak, is apt to attribute a certain social class to him . . . and to react accordingly' (T. H. Pear). For instance, a certain stereotype of a class is conjured up by a few words in a Lancashire accent, the speaker is pigeonholed, and truth and understanding of the person vanish. We are all aware of the status value of our accent; who among readers of the *Christian Graduate* has not received more deferential treatment from a shop-assistant than the previous customer because of a 'better' accent? And who has not at times 'put on' a better accent than his own when facing a potentially awkward situation (as some people do habitually when on the telephone)? One sometimes wonders whether a north country accent in a candidate for admission to a university does not put him at a disadvantage. So there is a whole range of reactions to accent, from the mildly amusing to the socially unjust. It is of course just as illogical to think that it is better to speak 'standard' English than Manchester English as it is to imagine that it is better to speak English than French. Indeed, there are some situations where it is better to speak one rather than the other, but the language or dialect a person speaks can tell us nothing about his character or personal worthiness. The pressure (exerted, however unintentionally, by the BBC above all) toward establishing London or Southern English as the only 'correct' or most cultivated form of speech ought to be resisted not only by folk-lorists and dialect societies, but by Christians, who should see this tendency as reinforcing the social inferiority of a great section of the community on the ground not of any inherent deficiency but of external appearance. In practical terms, there is nothing we can do about determining which accent shall be approved by our society, and probably little we can do about changing our own accent, even if we knew in what direction we ought to change it, but we can perhaps take up a more Christian attitude to uncultivated and dialectal accents, resist pressures to regard all accents beside that of our own class and region as ugly, and laugh at those people who have so far deceived themselves as to think they have 'no accent at all'.

4. *Friendship.* Vance Packard paints a terrifying picture of how a rise in income or rank among 'status seekers' will bring about a wholesale rejection of former friends and acquaintances. The tendency is not so marked in Britain, yet the same pressures are discernible—even if it is only a matter of taking on social obligations towards a new group at the expense of older friends of a lower socio-economic status. In addition to the enormous pressure in the business world to maintain social relationships with business contacts, there is the very natural tendency to form a majority of friendships within quite narrow groupings, whether professional, religious, or recreational. Members of graduates' fellowships must often have become aware of the dangers implicit in devotion to a group of very much like-minded people and in tacit acceptance of conventional professional and graduate standards. As members of churches we have a great advantage over non-churchgoers in the potential breadth of our social contact. Although most of our fellow-worshippers will probably be more or less middle-class, a vast range of occupation, wealth, and cultural interests may be represented even in one small congregation, and the Christian graduate would do well to regard this circumstance as a heaven-sent opportunity to avoid social

stratification in the graduate clique at the expense of genuine and mutually valuable relationships with a wide range of people. Of course to make friends with people simply because they are of a different class is a nasty thing to do; but the Christian will find in natural and unforced friendships based on the common life in Christ a more potent means of ridding himself of un-Christian notions of class than in any of the more negative aspects mentioned previously. Prejudices and misconceptions about other classes of people usually do not survive the test of friendship with those people.

These have been just a few examples of ways in which some of us feel we accede more or less (and often unwittingly) to worldly standards of judging and assessing others, and in so doing obscure our distinctively Christian witness. There are other harmful effects of class feeling, such as social climbing and the desire to 'keep up appearances' which affect ourselves more than others and are to a large extent matters for the individual conscience; but it is when personal relationships are damaged, the worth of the individual is undervalued, and communication and understanding between the various strata of the community (even within the church) break down because of class distinctions that the Christian must look closely at his own prejudices and presuppositions in the light of Christian ideals and attempt some practical expression of those ideals.

# *Teilhard de Chardin*

*D. GARETH JONES*

A discussion of:

A. *Teilhard de Chardin* by Claude Cuénot
Burns and Oates 492 pp. 42s.

B. *The Phenomenon of Man* by Teilhard de Chardin
Fontana Books 349 pp. 5s.

C. *The Appearance of Man* by Teilhard de Chardin
Collins 286 pp. 25s.

SINCE the publication in 1959 of *The Phenomenon of Man* there has been nothing less than a flood of books in this country by, and about, the Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Beginning as a trickle in 1959—accompanied however by a great deal of publicity—it became a torrent during 1965 and 1966 when six books by the master alone appeared. Coinciding with this onrush of literature there arose 'The Pierre Teilhard de Chardin Association of Great Britain and Ireland', formed with the object of making Teilhard's thought more widely accessible, and more readily