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Liberalism and the Church.

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PROBABLY no one would be rash enough to deny that the method of government by party, as carried on in this country, has great advantages. But it is no less true that it has great disadvantages; and it is probable that there are more people in Great Britain now who think that the drawbacks outweigh the advantages, than there ever were before since party government was established. It is not our purpose in the present article to discuss whether this is likely to lead to a change of system, or even whether such a change is to be desired; but only to refer to some aspects of the question which seem to affect directly the relations of one great political party with the English Church.

With the same general purposes in view, and in equal sincerity, minds of different sorts approach any problem from very different points of sight. In politics, more than in most spheres of activity, every question brings us up against several jarring interests, several different dangers attending every action, several different possibilities of doing harm as well as good, if not more harm than good. Every principle of action has a complementary principle, and if either be pushed to an extreme, that which is complementary becomes opposed. In this way each acts as a check on the other, and each adds what the other wants. Five such pairs may be taken as distinguishing Liberalism and Conservatism, and of these the first two pairs are fundamental to the others, and represent the essential difference between the outlook on the world and the general attitude towards its problems of the two parties. These are:

1. The importance of the individual and the importance of the relations between individuals. The Liberal mind thinks of the nation as an assemblage of individuals. The Conservative mind thinks of an individual as an integral part of the nation.

The Liberal thinks first of the duty of the State to the citizen; the Conservative of the duty of the citizen to the State.

2. The need of action and the need of caution. "Do something. Think what you are about by all means, but do something now," is the Liberal advice. "Consider the consequences carefully. Do something, but do not act until you see clearly what the consequences will be," is the Conservative advice.

There is a danger inherent in each set of principles. That of Liberalism is class legislation, that of Conservatism ineffectiveness. The Liberal may do more harm than good by his hasty and drastic action. The Conservative's legislation may be ineffective because of his excessive caution. The Liberal may injure individuals, both those on whose behalf he is legislating and others also, by not sufficiently considering their relations with one another. The Conservative may allow an evil to grow to serious proportions, or delay much-needed and beneficent progress, by his fear of upsetting existing relations. In the long run these opposite errors are probably about equally injurious to the best general welfare. The Conservative works for the Future with his eyes on the Past, and is in danger of doing but little for the Present; while the Liberal works for the Present with his eyes on the Present, and is in danger of imperilling the Future by forgetting the Past.

These two pairs of principles are fundamental to the Liberal and Conservative positions. Three pairs more follow from the combination of these:

3. The equality of men and the existence of distinctions are the first of these secondary pairs. Liberalism emphasizes the primary equality of man, while not forgetting the distinctions of birth, possessions, character, abilities, position, attainments, which actually part mankind into classes. Conservatism urges the folly and injustice of overlooking these, yet does not wish to forget essential equality.

4. Liberalism urges and defends the right of liberty of thought, not forgetting the respect due to the authority of

knowledge and of the belief and experience of former generations; while a sober Conservatism urges and defends this authority, not forgetting the right of liberty of thought.

5. Last, Liberalism urges strongly the responsibility of the rich toward the poor, while it does not forget the liberty of all to do as they will with their own; and Conservatism presses the rights of property, while it does not forget the responsibility of the rich toward the poor.

These five pairs of principles seem to sum up the characteristic positions of the two great parties, or schools of thought, in politics. Details of policy on particular problems are active expressions, by no means always accurate, of these first-rank and second-rank principles. These five, and these five only, may be said to be essential to Liberalism. Third and fourth rank principles become closely associated with it, and are adopted enthusiastically by it, such as Free Trade, which is traditional, but certainly not essential to Liberalism.

The five pairs are consistent with one another, the three which we have placed in the second rank growing naturally and inevitably out of the first two. When we say that the Liberal puts the responsibility of the rich toward the poor before the rights of property, it may seem as if in this instance he has changed places with the Conservative, and is preferring the importance of the relations between individuals to that of the individual. A very little thought will show that this is not so. He thinks of the individual poor man and his needs, and insists on helping him out of the pockets of the rich; and is in danger of so doing this as to set class against class, dislocate the relations of mutual dependence, and, still more important, mutual confidence and good feeling; so, in the end, injuring both the rich, whom he is ready to sacrifice, and the poor, whom he wishes to help. The Conservative, on the other hand, is so anxious to avoid this serious mistake, that his legislation is in danger of being ineffective to help the poor. The enemies of the Conservative accuse him of toadying to wealth, while those of the Liberal accuse him of toadying to the shallow popularity

of the moment and the interested plaudits of the most selfish and ignorant of the mob. If we deal with conscious and deliberate motives, both accusations are—at least as regards reputable statesmen—no doubt equally false. If we deal with tendencies and actual results, both may equally have an element of truth.

Complementary charges of electricity or magnetism attract one another. But when one party lays stress on one principle, and another party lays stress on another principle which is complementary to the first, the result is repulsion; and each is driven to a more extreme position than it would have taken up if left to itself. Although each is compelled by reason and public opinion to acknowledge the principles complementary to its own, yet each thinks that those are unduly pressed by the other side, and that its own must be pressed in order to restore the balance. Therefore the Liberals are more uncompromising in their opinions than they would be if it were not for the Conservatives, and the Conservatives than they would be if it were not for them. This is only human nature, and is inevitable. It is a disadvantage inherent in the method of government by party, and in a less degree in all associated action by men of different opinions. The advantages of government by party are, in the main, threefold: that both sets of principles are continually put forward and skilfully explained and defended in the country; that the alternation of government gives each an opportunity of prevailing in turn; and that even the side which is in opposition has power to enforce some regard to its principles, and check the madness of extremists on the other side. Yet under the stress of party conflict, legislation can seldom be quite impartial, giving due weight to both sides of the problem, at any rate when it is controversial legislation, but is strained to one side or the other. The result is often an alternation of rather one-sided enactments, which cannot be so good for the national welfare as more even legislation.

The Church of England takes the Liberal position on all

five of the pairs of principles enumerated, and is doing so in a rapidly increasing degree.

1. It is quite essential to the Church's teaching to put the importance of the individual before that of the relations between individuals. It regards the individual as eternal, his present relations with others as temporary. In its teaching the character of the individual is regarded as the determining factor, and the element of chief importance, and the foundation of the relations between individuals, in a degree in which no other kind of teaching can so regard it. Its messages are addressed to individuals, and only to groups when each has first separately accepted them.

2. This being so, the purpose of its existence is to *do something* to promote the formation of character and the best general good. It puts this need, of doing something to raise mankind and combat sin and suffering, far before the need of cautious calculating of results, believing that it is its duty to do its best in the *present*, leaving the consequences in the Master's hands. It has a message to deliver and a work to perform, which come in its estimation before all other things, and, indeed, are the only things that really matter. This attitude of mind does not mean recklessness, either in the Church or necessarily in the sphere of politics. It does mean a greater readiness to try experiments, a greater adaptability to changing circumstances, a greater elasticity of method, a greater courage for decisive and vigorous action.

Similarly, and consequently, the Church is distinctly Liberal rather than Conservative with regard to the second-rank principles.

3. It puts the essential equality and brotherhood of men far before all social and temporary distinctions. Indeed, in its services and sacraments, in its work in the world, and in all official acts of its ministers, all these distinctions as such are totally and purposely ignored. And this spirit of human equality is becoming increasingly dominant in all its relations with mankind. But it has always been one of the characteristic distinctions

between the Church and the world; and if the Church in any way and generation has failed to show it, it is then most plain that this is its true spirit; for then both friend and foe alike confess that therein it has been unlike its Master, who is no respecter of persons.

4. The English Church teaches liberty of thought more as a duty than as a privilege. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind," is the foundation of its work. It uses the authority of knowledge and of the belief and experience of many former generations to persuade, not to compel, men. In putting this liberty of thought before respect to authority is seen the most distinctive point of difference between the Churches of England and Rome. Rome takes the strongly Conservative position, putting authority far before liberty of thought; the English Church takes a moderately Liberal position, putting liberty of thought first, but not extravagantly so. With regard to the world in general, it guards with jealousy this principle of complete freedom of thought, holding its doctrines too precious to be forced on such as cannot value them, and knowing that only free acceptance of them can be of any use. With regard to even the inmost circle of its own members, who, *ex hypothesi*, have freely accepted them, and are privileged to join in the highest act of worship, no declaration of belief is required as a condition, except the Apostles' Creed, which is the simplest, most primitive, most elementary, and therefore the broadest, basis of membership possible. Short of this the title to the honoured name of Christian becomes at least doubtful; and to fall seriously short of it is, quite without doubt, to forfeit that title altogether.

5. It puts the responsibility of the rich toward the poor as an imperative moral duty, the neglect of which will certainly bring judgment; and utterly rejects the plea of the rights of property as an excuse to avoid that self-denial, which is one of the essentials of its doctrine. The rich, it says, are stewards of their property, not absolute owners, and are answerable to God—though to God alone—for a right use of it. If in any

place or time the Church has taught otherwise, it has been admittedly so far unfaithful to its Master, who taught a rich man that he was not perfect in religion by setting him the too hard task of giving all that he had to the poor, and told the story of the Rich Man and the Beggar, and said, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God."

We cannot think that anyone will deny these to be the principles of the English Church. Such a denial could not be maintained if it were made. If mistakes have been made at any period in the Church's story by individuals, groups, or generations, these mistakes are beside the mark. The Doctrine of the Church has had slowly to pervade a hostile world. Its members are living in the world, and their shortcomings are the shortcomings of the world and worldliness. The Gospel Kingdom has to pervade the world as the leaven pervades the dough. The world is still hostile, and where and when the members of the Church can be shown to fall short of the highest doctrine of the Church (and that is everywhere) it is because the leavening, as yet, is incomplete.

Of course, we do not say that Conservatism is un-Christian. All the ten principles given above are good and necessary. To neglect one is to be an extremist in regard to the complementary one. Sober Liberalism and sober Conservatism are closely allied, and can, both in theory and practice, work well and efficiently together. They are thrown into opposition, not by any inherent incompatibility, but by the Party system. One type of mind puts one set of principles first, another the other set. Both may be good Christians. Both may be loyal Churchmen. But the Liberal is in closest agreement with the English Church's outlook on the world. A new type of Churchman is springing up, more distinctly Liberal than in recent ages. To him the importance of the individual, and the need of prompt and vigorous action, are the first considerations more than ever before, and he therefore holds most strongly the equality of men, liberty of thought, and the responsibility of

those who have to come to the aid of those who have not. In this attitude of mind the fundamental principles of the Gospel encourage him. Thousands of convinced, and loyal, and earnest Churchmen are oppressed, as by a nightmare, by the sufferings of the very poor, whom they see sick with cold, weak with hunger, worn by hopeless struggles with privation and want. In these helpless ones they see souls for whom Christ died, as valuable to Him as any of the powerful and rich—nay, often and often far more valuable. This is the type of Churchman who is essentially Liberal at heart. In his Church he finds a mighty force, able to raise and strengthen, able to bless both rich and poor. By its persistent antagonism to this force, which he knows for the most effective to regenerate the world of all forces which can be turned to that purpose, the Liberal party drives him into opposition. Such men are, of all others, the truest Liberals, the very ones whom the party most needs and ought to draw into its ranks. It is time for the Liberal party to join hands with the Church. It is time for them boldly to cast aside the counsels of fanatics, demagogues, and bigots; all who try to set class against class, all who try to revive religious persecution, all who—in the name of religious liberty, a name perverted and misused—seek to weaken the forces of religion, and to tie the hands of those who are working with the most potent means to regenerate the world. If these Churchmen are included in its ranks, Liberalism will raise its head with a strength it has not known for many years, will carry out reforms which it is at present impotent to effect; and perhaps its crowning triumph may be to accomplish that religious co-operation and unity to which this country has been long a stranger, which will do more for the regeneration of the British Empire than any Parliamentary or political force can do. The present opposition is an unnatural and fratricidal war. The Church will meet Liberalism more than half-way. Already it has, in more than one important line of policy, upheld the hands of a bitterly hostile Government, forgetting that hostility, by active co-operation, or by withdrawing its forces from those political

camps in which it is received as a friend and ally; so proving that the Church is disinterested, that its chief—nay, its only great—aim is the salvation of man. Why cannot Liberals believe a truth which lies so clearly before them? The Church will spring to meet them half-way on those points on which there is now conflict of opinion. Societies of Churchmen are continually trying to adjudicate these points on a reasonable, practical, and just basis, but Liberalism has as yet failed, through the influence of irreconcilable bigots, to meet them. This is unworthy of a great party, unworthy of the aims which that party sets before it, unworthy of the deeds that it has done, and the deeds it desires with a whole-souled and disinterested patriotism still to carry out.