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The Church and the Poor.

A SERIES OF HISTORICAL SKETCHES.

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VII.

The Reformation—Luther and Calvin.

IN my last paper I pointed out that even before the Reformation there had arisen a growing secularization of the means taken for relieving the poor. First civic, and then national, authorities had already begun to assume a responsibility towards those in need, a responsibility which during earlier periods had been left entirely to the Church.[1] At this point, therefore, it will be necessary for me to remind my readers that I am not writing a history of Poor Relief, but of the means and methods which, from motives of religion, the Church as a whole, and individuals and societies within the Church, have employed to help the poor and to improve social conditions generally.

With the coming of the Reformation the term "the Church" must in these papers to some extent change its meaning. So far, at any rate since the days of Gregory the Great, it has meant the undivided Church of Western Christendom, of which the Pope was the recognized earthly head. From this point onwards it may mean either organized Western Christianity—*i.e.*, the sum total of the various parts or fragments into which the Catholic Church of the West broke up—or it may mean what we term the English Church. Under the first interpretation it would, of course, include the work of the great Continental reformers.

[1] Certainly since the Reformation the influence of the Church on the relief of the poor has been more indirect than it was previously; but if indirect, it has also been very real. Current conceptions of Christian duty have affected not only the clergy, but the laity—*e.g.*, statesmen who have framed the laws and Boards of Guardians who have administered them. The revival of interest in the doctrine of the Incarnation during recent years has had an immense influence upon the treatment of the poor.

Once again, let me insist that the period which we term the Reformation was marked not only by doctrinal and ecclesiastical, but also by immense social, changes. The two sets of changes proceeded side by side; they were not independent, yet we must be extremely cautious in speaking of any particular change in either category as being either the cause or effect of a change in the other.[1] What I would maintain is, that quite apart from a consideration of the doctrinal and ecclesiastical changes which took part, the immense alterations which occurred in social conditions during this period demand the most careful attention of those who are interested in the history of the welfare of the people, and who would learn valuable lessons from a study of that history.[2]

But especially during the second half of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century a rapid change was taking place in another, and an extremely important, sphere of activity —that of thought. This affected the conceptions both of religion and of everyday conduct; it affected the whole conception of life and duty. This change of thought was chiefly due to enlarged knowledge. It manifested itself in a growth of the critical spirit, also of the scientific spirit, and in a much more free exercise of the reason; it resulted in a harvest of individualistic tendencies and an ever-growing demand for liberty. We have no right to assume, as is frequently the case, that in these various movements the Reformers invariably stood on the one side, and those who failed to follow them on the other. Very frequently the actual conduct of the Reformers was in direct contradiction to the principles they professed; and even so far as freedom of thought is concerned, men like Erasmus and More were far in advance of men like Calvin and Knox.[3]

[1] Professor Pollard in "Cambridge Modern History," vol. ii., p. 175: "The assertion that there was no connection between the Reformation and the Peasants' Revolt is as far from the truth as the statement that the one produced the other."

[2] The "economic" changes which took place in Western Europe from the middle of the fifteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century can hardly be exaggerated. On the whole subject see chap. xv. of the "Cambridge Modern History," vol. i. (by Dr. Cunningham).

[3] Much that is most interesting on this subject will be found in the following chapters of Beard's "Hibbert Lectures": (iv.) "The Principles

Another question arises in connection with the effect of the Reformation, or rather in connection with the effect of its individualistic tendencies, upon the welfare of the poor. To some extent the Reformation synchronizes with the rise of capitalism; that is, with the growing power of capitalism.[1] Side by side with this, and not independent of it, we see the effect of individualistic conceptions in the growth of competition in trade. The facts are these: The countries which largely accepted the principles of the Reformation became, on the whole, the chief commercial countries of Europe, those in which trade rapidly increased; indeed, one might go a step farther, and say that in these countries the chief commercial centres became the great strongholds of advanced Reformation, or Puritan, principles. In these countries, and especially in these commercial centres, we find competition in trade—often with disastrous effects upon the poor—becoming more and more accentuated. I simply place these facts before my readers, leaving them to see connections and draw conclusions for themselves.[2]

The Reformation had many indirect results, among these the most important for our present purpose was that it revolutionized the conception of charity. The policy of the Reformers set very strongly against indiscriminate charity, which had become nothing less than a curse to society during the later Middle Ages. For instance, Luther laid down the two following principles: First, "Begging is to be rigidly prohibited; all who are not old or weak shall work. No beggars shall be permitted to stay who do not belong to the parish." On the second principle it seems as if he would relieve the

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of the Reformation"; (v.) "The Reformation in Relation to Reason and Liberty"; (x.) "The Growth of the Critical Spirit"; (xi.) "The Development of Philosophical Method and Scientific Investigation." See also chap. xix. of vol. ii. of the "Cambridge Modern History."

[1] See chap. ii., book v., "The Intervention of Capital," in Cunningham's "Western Civilization."

[2] The whole subject of the connection between individualism in religion and in commerce is one which deserves more study than it has yet received. Studied historically, the subject might prove enlightening and instructive.

Church entirely of its responsibilities to the poor, for he says: "Each town should provide for its own poor people . . . poor householders who have honourably laboured at their craft or in agriculture ought to be given loans from the public chest; and this aid shall be given to them without return, if they are unable to restore it."[1]

History is full of examples showing how easily the pendulum swings from one extreme to the other. It seems to have been so in regard to almsgiving during the Reformation. Instead of lavishness, we find absolute niggardliness; instead of too much charity, we find callousness towards the actual needs of the poor. In the celebrated Sermon of the Plough, preached by Bishop Latimer at St. Paul's in 154$\frac{8}{9}$, we read: "In times past men were full of pity and compassion, but now there is no pity; for in London their brother shall die in the streets for cold; he shall lie sick at the door between stock and stock . . . and perish there for hunger. In times past . . . when any man died they would bequeath great sums of money toward the relief of the poor . . . now charity is waxen cold, none helpeth the poor."[2] Again, in a letter to Cecil, Bishop Ridley writes: "I must be a suitor unto you in our good Master Christ's cause; I beseech you be good to Him. The matter is, sir, alas! He hath lain too long abroad in the streets of London, both hungry, naked, and cold."[3]

But before I enter upon the effects which the Reformation had upon the treatment of the poor in England, I would point out two most valuable lessons which we may learn from the two greatest Continental Reformers: The first from the *work* of Luther, which should be of the nature of an extremely strong warning; the second from the *teaching* of Calvin, which is already having, and I trust may continue to have, a far-reaching influence for good.[4]

[1] "Christ and Civilization," p. 367.
[2] Quoted in Leonard's "English Poor Relief," p. 29, note.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[4] I refer, of course, to the "social principles" and "social teaching" of the Bible.

I showed in my last paper that when the Reformation dawned there was in various parts of Europe, and arising from many different causes, a very considerable amount of distress; among the peasants of Germany this distress was particularly acute.[1] For many years there had existed a condition of growing discontent, which finally came to a head and broke out in the Peasants' War of 1524-25. What I would now consider is the part which Luther took in regard to this revolt. I cannot here enter at length into the history or the causes of this rebellion; briefly, it was due to poverty, which was the result of heavy burdens imposed by feudal services, pernicious game laws, growing taxation, and exactions demanded by the ecclesiastical courts. Probably the nobles were themselves suffering severely from the changes in economic conditions, and therefore they tried to shift the burden from their own shoulders on to those of the poorest of the people, a device which has been attempted at various times.[2]

Possibly, Luther's own teaching, in which he had denounced not only the exactions of the Papacy, but also merchants and lawyers, as robbers, had helped to fan the flames.[3] We must remember that in the earliest demands of the peasants there was nothing revolutionary; on the contrary, they were reasonable in themselves, and were couched in moderate language.[4] But as the movement grew, its objects undoubtedly widened; its language became more passionate, and its tone more and more extreme. At first, also, there was among many of the leaders a distinctly religious spirit, one of which the nature was quite excellent. It must, however, be conceded that though, especially at first, the great majority of those taking part were peasants with very genuine wrongs, another element was gradually absorbed into the movement. I refer to that section of the

[1] For a brief account of these see "Christ and Civilization," pp. 340 *et seq.*

[2] It is well known that the burden of increased taxation generally falls ultimately upon the very poor.

[3] See T. M. Lindsay, "Luther and the German Revolution," p. 170.

[4] "They were expressed in religious phraseology, and supported by arguments drawn from the Scriptures" ("Christ and Civilization," p. 341).

population which includes a number of the criminal classes, and is always ready to participate in disorder.[1] Though the movement was essentially an agrarian one, it did to some extent affect the towns. These were generally divided in their sympathies. Usually the mass of the people held with the peasants, while the richer classes, represented by the Council and the leading citizens, were against these.[2] The movement, as we know, was ultimately crushed by the ruling powers. It was crushed with the most heartless ferocity,[3] and largely by the help of foreign mercenaries. It ended in what can only be termed a massacre, in which not less than 100,000 of the peasants fell by the sword.[4]

Luther's attitude towards the movement, and the permanent effects of this attitude upon religion in Germany, are extremely instructive. In fact, I know of few episodes in the whole course of history from which a clearer and more instructive warning may be learnt. This is my chief reason for bringing the episode before my readers.

At first Luther's sympathies were undoubtedly with the peasants.[5] Before the revolt broke out he had inveighed in no measured terms against the misgovernment of the Princes and ecclesiastical rulers, also against the growing luxuriousness of the wealthy.[6] Thus, to a certain extent, if unintentionally, he was certainly a contributory cause of the outbreak. When this actually occurred, Luther adopted at first what appeared to be a more or less neutral position. On the one hand, he expressed not only sympathy, but actually a measure of approval of the demands made by the peasants; on the other hand, he warned these that if they resorted to violence the movement must end in disaster.

Luther, of course, was in an extremely difficult position. He knew at heart that the original demands of the peasants were just, that they were actually asking no more than the right to live.

[1] "Cambridge Modern History," p. 182.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 185.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 191.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 194.
[5] "He had sympathy with the demands of the 'Twelve Articles'" (T. M. Lindsay, "Luther," p. 183).
[6] *E.g.*, in his "Appeal to the Nobility of the German Nation."

But he could not (so he judged) do without the help both of the Princes and also of the well-to-do and official classes, among whom his theological opinions had chiefly spread.[1] But when, at this juncture, Luther was content to impart what has been termed "spiritual" advice to the starving peasants, he was committing an error which many a well-intentioned religious leader has committed since then. When men are hungry, they are not in a mental condition to appreciate, much less to be content with, such advice. Thought is doubtless spiritual, but you cannot think without a brain, which is a physical organ, and consequently demands regular physical nourishment.

Luther, however, did not long remain in a neutral position. In April or May of 1525 he issued the vehement (and indeed infamous) tract, "Against the Murderous Thieving Hordes of Peasants," in which he called upon the Princes to crush the revolt. I know that when the immediate circumstances—*e.g.*, the fiery proclamations of Münzer and the campaign of destruction which followed these in Thuringia and the Harz[2]—are remembered, something may be said for Luther; but that others, under the severe pressure of actual want, had resorted to violence was no justification for the language which Luther used, not in speech, which may be uttered in the heat of the moment, but in writing, which was printed and issued. The following extract from Luther's pamphlet will show its nature and its spirit: "In the case of an insurgent, every man is both judge and executioner. Therefore, whoever can should knock down, strangle, and stab such, publicly and privately, and think nothing so venomous, pernicious, and devilish, as an insurgent. . . . Such wonderful times are these that a Prince can merit heaven better with bloodshed than another with prayer."[3]

The evil results of Luther's action at that time have never passed away; they actually affect religious life in Germany at the present day. This, as I have already said, is my reason for

[1] "Cambridge Modern History," p. 178.
[2] Lindsay, "Luther and the German Reformation," pp. 184 *et seq.*
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

dwelling upon the subject. The immediate results of Luther's policy were: First, the peasants were alienated from Protestantism; some relapsed back into Roman Catholicism, but the majority drifted into unbelief.[1] Secondly, the Lutheran movement ceased to be in any sense national; it depended henceforth for its very existence upon the support of political powers. Melanchthon was compelled to admit "that the decrees of the Lutheran Church were merely platonic conclusions without the support of the princes."[2]

Luther's conduct—indeed, his policy—was not inspired by any high principle or lofty ideal. It was governed by considerations of interest; it was based upon what he believed to be the necessities of the moment; it was purely utilitarian, and that not the highest, but rather in the lowest, sense of the word.[3] Its permanent results have been: First, that neither Lutheranism as a system of religion, nor the Lutheran Church as its expression, has ever been in a true sense either the religion or the Church of the German *people*. Lutheranism has been a State religion, protected by the State, and consequently under the control or overlordship of the State.[4] Its clergy, as a body, have never been able to be quite independent witnesses for God, and truth, and righteousness. Secondly, the Lutheran Church has never, as a Church, been able to identify itself with either the principles or the work of Christian social reform. Individual leaders, especially during the last two generations, have doubtless championed the rights of the poor, but as a Church it cannot be said to have stood for those rights. It has been the Church of the rulers rather than the Church of the subjects. Thirdly, the anti-Christian character of almost all forms of German Socialism has been an abiding result of Luther's unhappy policy.[5] Those who have been on the side of social progress have too often felt

[1] "Christ and Civilization," p. 344.
[2] "Cambridge Modern History," vol. ii., p. 194.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 195.
[4] "Luther's deep distrust of 'the common man' . . . prevented him from believing in a democratic Church, and led him to bind his reformation in the fetters of a secular control to the extent of regarding the secular Government as having a quasi-episcopal function" (Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 189).
[5] "Christ and Civilization," p. 344.

that they must look elsewhere for sympathy and practical help. How could they look for assistance to a Church whose interests are so palpably bound up with the interests of those who have, and whose chief aim is too often simply to retain, at once their position and possessions?

More than once, as we shall see in the course of subsequent chapters, the Church of England has, since the Reformation, succumbed to the same temptation—to be guided by a policy of present interest; and more than once she has suffered severely from this choice. The history of the English Church, especially during the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, furnishes only too many examples, both of isolated actions and courses of policy by which she lost, as she deserved to lose, the affection of the poorer classes. The danger of the Church still making mistakes in this direction has not entirely passed; hence it is well to have our memories refreshed upon the part played by Luther during the Peasants' War and upon the disastrous results of his conduct.

From Luther I turn to Calvin, whom we do not as a rule regard as primarily a social reformer, though in this, more than in any other sphere of activity, I think Calvin's greatness was revealed. I am not going either to enter into Calvin's interesting history, or to deal with his theological opinions. I am only concerned with him here in connection with the great principle he laid down (and which he zealously tried to put into practice) in regard to the true method of dealing with the social problem, and, as part of this, as to the best way of helping the poor.

To understand Calvin we must remember that he was trained as a lawyer; he was primarily a great jurist, and also a great moralist. At the same time he was a great "humanist." His earliest work was a commentary on the "De Clementia" of Cicero. In this commentary Calvin's character is revealed. He is a man "with a passion for conduct, moral, veracious, strenuous."[1] To

[1] "Cambridge Modern History," vol. ii., p. 352. (The chapter on Calvin is by the late Dr. A. M. Fairbairn.)

have "clemency is true humanity," and Calvin applies this doctrine socially. Man pitiful to men will be sensible of their rights and of his own duties. It has been said of Calvin, probably in view of his cast-iron system of theology, that "he never changed"; but this is not to say that he did not develop.[1] His strong conviction that religion must (in the sense of "inevitably") be translated into morality or conduct may have made him harsh, and in one well-known instance it made him positively cruel.[2] Throughout his career he was governed by this conviction. To most people, as I have already said, Calvin is pre-eminently the founder of a theological system (which is not the fact); actually he is much rather a great statesman, a great educationist, and the reformer of the morals of Geneva. These are Calvin's true titles to greatness. The key to his conduct is to remember that he "conceives the Gospel as a new law which ought to be embodied in a new life, individual and social."[3] Of course, to understand Calvin's work we must have some knowledge of the political, social, and moral condition of Geneva when Calvin arrived there for the first time.[4] I cannot, however, stay to describe these here further than to say that the moral conditions were very much what we knew to have been those of a city under ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the middle of the sixteenth century. There are those who are apt to assume that with the advent or acceptance of Protestantism moral conditions would necessarily improve. But Fairbairn admits that, though at least two months before Calvin's arrival Geneva had sworn to live according to the holy Evangelical Law and Word of God,[5] it had not actually become any more moral in character. It had simply "changed its mind" in religion.[6] What Calvin set himself to organize was not simply a city which should also be a Church—which was the old Geneva idea—but a Church which should be efficaciously moral.

[1] Dr. Fairbairn says: "Few men may have changed less; but few also have developed more."

[2] I refer, of course, to the death of Servetus.

[3] "Cambridge Modern History," vol. ii., p. 357.

[4] *Ibid.*, vol. ii., pp. 358 *et seq.*

[5] *Ibid.*, vol. ii., p. 363.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 367.

Now I come to the special point in which Calvin demands our attention in connection with our present subject. Briefly, Calvin made the Bible at once the foundation, the textbook, and the inspiration of his whole social system. Its teaching was not simply the best, but the only true guide to social reform. The way he approached the subject was thus: The Bible contains the revealed will of God; therefore a State, or a social polity, should be founded upon the teaching of Scripture. A theocracy meant nothing more or less than a State founded and built up upon this teaching; it meant "the application of the truths of the Bible to civic and political life." Of course, "in claiming that the Bible was a textbook of sociology[1] as well as religion Calvin took up a position which was destined to produce revolutionary ideas in the future."[2] The establishment of this theocracy was to be the joint work of Church and State. The State so constituted and established possessed supreme power over the individual, and the individual had no rights against the State. This naturally followed, from the obvious fact that there could be no appeal against the law of God. The difficulty lay in the application of these principles. One point upon which Calvin insisted was "that the individual is bound to sacrifice his own interests for the interests of the community. On the other hand, Calvin taught that the State made itself responsible for his well-being. As an application of this Calvin held that the State must find useful employment for every man that could work. As a practical application of this particular conviction Calvin introduced new industries into Geneva.[3]

The principle enunciated by Calvin, that the Bible must be the supreme rule in every department of Church and State, is in agreement with the whole spirit of the Reformation—in fact, it

[1] Unfortunately, the word "sociology" is used to-day with very different meaning. See the essay "On the Origin and Use of the Word Sociology" in "Sociological Papers," 1904 (Macmillan and Co.). Here the word is tantamount to "the science of the constitution of society."

[2] The position is really at the basis of all forms of so-called "*Christian* Socialism."

[3] "Christ and Civilization," pp. 349 *et seq.*

is simply an application of its most comprehensive doctrine—the supremacy of Holy Scripture.[1] But at once the question arises: How is it to be worked out? Undoubtedly Geneva offered a particularly favourable field for doing this, because by tradition at Geneva there had always been an exceptional unity of Church and State;[2] also from the small size of its territory, and the limited number of its inhabitants, Geneva offered a manageable field for a social experiment. That a considerable measure of success did attend Calvin's efforts cannot be denied.

The principle which Calvin enunciated has had an influence far beyond his own age. It has, if under different forms, been strongly revived during the last few years, and its influence in several directions is yet growing. The difficulty, as in the case of every comprehensive principle, lies in its application to actual needs and circumstances. If we admit that the "social" teaching of Christ is the heart and essence of the "social" teaching of Holy Scripture, and if we say that the teaching, both of Christ and of Holy Scripture, must be spiritually interpreted, then we may claim that the supremacy of the social teaching of Holy Scripture is the principle for which all the Christian Societies and Unions for Social Service, which are so active at the present time, are contending.

But we may go a step farther than this in the direction of Calvin's teaching, and say that actually (*e.g.*, in the teaching of Christ, and in the great principles enunciated by the Old Testament Prophets) in Holy Scripture the laws of social welfare are for all time enunciated; and further, that these laws are as irrefragable, and their issues as inevitable, as are such scientific laws as those which govern the motions of bodies, as the laws of light, or heat, or electricity. We must, however, be extremely careful in our application of this faith or conviction. We must remember that we are dealing with substances and forces besides which all other substances and forces are extremely

[1] To Calvin the supremacy and authority of Holy Scripture was based upon the concurrent witness of the Holy Spirit in the Written Word and in the believer's soul. See his "Institutio," book i., chap. vii.

[2] "Cambridge Modern History," vol. ii., pp. 358 *et seq.*

simple. Suppose we look upon the social course which under any particular set of circumstances should be pursued as a problem to be solved, we must remember that the number of "variants" in the problem is extremely great; also that both our knowledge of the nature of these variants (which are composed of human nature), and also our knowledge of the forces under the influence of which these variants act, is even yet extremely limited.[1]

The danger to a nature like Calvin's, which had been accentuated by his legal training, was to regard the whole Bible as a legal code, every part of which was of equal authority. The critical-historical spirit by which we seek to distinguish what is essential to the teaching, from what is merely accidental to the age, of a Biblical writer had not been as fully developed in Calvin's time as it has in our own. At the same time we cannot exaggerate the truth or value of the great social principles (the principles of social righteousness) which underlie the teaching of the Hebrew Prophets. This is very far from saying that we can regard the legalistic code of Judaism as a standard of conduct for the present time. It is in noticing the chasm which separates essentials from accidentals that we see that, while "the spirit" of the social teaching of the Bible "giveth life," a rigid application of "the letter" of that teaching may actually be productive of destruction.

Those who accepted the doctrines of the Reformation could no longer accept the medieval "theory of charity," which we have seen had been the growth of several centuries. The chief motive from which the greater part of the charity of the Middle Ages had been bestowed no longer existed for the Reformers.

[1] This may not be the place to enter into a present controversy of very considerable importance, but in the present reaction against a so-called "mechanical theory of the universe" there is at least a danger of the pendulum of thought swinging too far in the opposite direction. A "spiritual" interpretation of the universe, to use a current and popular phrase, is not necessarily a conception of the universe from which very definite fixed laws are necessarily excluded. Probably, however, these laws may not be so simple or so easy to state as was at one time supposed.

The doctrines of penance and of good works were no longer accepted by them. The consideration of personal reward or advantage to the giver of charity, either here or hereafter, could not now enter. No one who believed in the teaching of the Reformers could regard the bestowal of charity or the establishment of a hospital as a means for procuring a mitigation of the sufferings of purgatory. When people now give charity they must do so from purely altruistic motives. They must think of the needs and sufferings of the poor and of their duty to these; they must not consider any advantage which, by giving, they themselves may reap.

But while it may be a comparatively easy thing to take away a certain motive, it is often an extremely difficult thing to put another motive of equal strength in its place. This was very practically proved during the period of the Reformation. As I have already shown, a very serious check was given to the flow of charity, and undoubtedly, at least for a time, this was the cause of very real suffering. Also, unfortunately, this happened during a season of exceptional distress among the poor, quite apart from any causes connected with the Reformation. It is during such seasons that charity, if wisely given, is most useful. But at the time of which we are speaking the chief source of charity of every kind was suddenly cut off. In England neither alms nor food could any longer be obtained at the monastery gate; the wayfarer could no longer find shelter in the *hospitium;* the sick were no longer tended and cared for in the monastic infirmary, because the monastery itself had ceased to exist. Not only had the monastery gone, but its possessions, part of which at least were the patrimony of the poor, had also gone. In a few instances, but very few, a portion of these possessions had been saved for purposes directly or indirectly connected with the poor; but in the vast majority of instances both monastic lands and monastic revenues had been entirely alienated from every charitable purpose.

In my next article I shall try to show what new methods of dealing with the problem of the poor were tried during this period.