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Political and Religious Ideals.

ONE comes frequently, of recent years, within hearing of the contention that it is the business and the duty of the State to make its legislative programmes conform to and embody religious ideals. Particular measures of reform are advocated on the ground that the line of action they inculcate would, in the case of individuals, be the religious and Christian line—and State action, no less than individual action, ought to be religious and Christian. In every legislative enactment which makes, or seems to make, for the greatest good of the greatest number, some advance is accomplished towards bringing in the Kingdom of God; and conversely, every one who cares for bringing in the Kingdom of God ought to favour any legislative programme which makes, or seems to make, for the greatest good of the greatest number. From the proposition (which of course is not here in dispute) that the mutual relations of man ought in the last resort to be regulated by the religious and Christian spirit, a quick passage, or rather flight, is made to the proposition (much more highly disputable) that by legislation this desired end can be achieved; and so we are carried on to the conclusion that religious and political ideals are, or should be, one and the same thing.

The contention is attractive—the more attractive, at its first blush, in proportion to the greater nobleness of the mind to which it is presented. Plausible, also, it must be pronounced. But is it sound? Perhaps its very attractiveness and plausibility make it all the more incumbent on those whom it magnetizes to examine it, in order to see whether they are not yielding assent to it too soon. Not even the prospective delight of forcing on the divinely-appointed Golden Age with the sharp weapon of law—not even the captivating winsomeness of the idea of Christianizing the State, the idea under whose spell so many young men see visions and so many old men dream dreams to-day—should make us refuse to consider the fundamental

possibilities or impossibilities involved. Can religious ideals be realized in the political sphere, in the State as commonly understood?

Leaving aside for the moment (to return to it presently) the question whether political and religious ideals are, or can be, the same, the primary consideration is the familiar one that the State bases itself in the final issue on force. The consideration is not by any means new; still, it is worth while to set it down. The fact, as stated, is obviously indisputable. The State bases itself in the final issue upon force. However great the likeness, however absolute the identity, we might ultimately find between political and religious ideals, this would none the less be true; and this coercive element in all State action makes it impossible that any adjustment of one man's attitude or action towards another, resulting from the State's decision, should be of religious quality or rank. The State, in all its legislation, in all its administrative edicts, in everything that, *qua* State, it does, assumes a clash of interests, a conflict of desires and antagonisms, between individual and individual, between order and order, between class and class. It comes into existence and does its work, in fact, simply because there is not a sufficiency of voluntary action to keep things straight. Parliamentary laws, together with all the rest of the weapons which the State employs—the policeman and the Courts of law standing in reserve behind—*make* men do what, without compulsion, they cannot be depended upon to do. Laws may be thoroughly beneficent and wise; for the members of the community they are, nevertheless, the moment they are entered upon the statute-book, a command which rules all voluntary, and consequently all moral, action out. The State does not correct or purify, but supplants, the activity of the will. The choice between two alternatives is no longer available; and the sources of actions correspondent to the laws are henceforth in the laws' suggestions and prescriptions, not in individual minds. However many times such a legislating process be repeated, however far it be carried, it can do nothing at all to bring about a fulfilment of the religious

ideal. For the very conception of such a fulfilment involves the idea of choice, on the part of those who fulfil, between two courses—a better and a worse; and it involves, further, the idea that the choice is made on moral grounds, *because* the one chosen is the better and *because* the one repudiated is the worse. Religious ideals are fulfilled when a man, becoming conscious of clashing between his own interests and another's, resolves the discord in the way which the sense of right dictates. Religious ideals are fulfilled when a man, with power to hurt or to help his brother, determines to help him, not because he must, but because—standing mid-way between the two alternatives, with no external force moving him to right or left—the inward forces move him to restrain the power of harming and to bid the power of helping go free. The utmost that State action can accomplish is to produce an outward condition of things *looking like* what religious motives and religious inspirations would produce. It can bid men (and secure their heed to its bidding) do what, if religious ideals possessed them, they would do. But imitation, perfect as it may be, is imitation still. And in the very act of saying "You must," the State disables itself from any fulfilling of religious ideals as regards the relations between man and man. For the essence of a religious action is that it springs, not from without, but from within.

Up to this point, however, it has been allowed, for the purposes of the argument, that political and religious ideals may be taken as being one and the same. All that has been said is reinforced tenfold when we turn to a critical examination of this fundamental point. For a careful consideration of it must lead to the conclusion that political and religious ideals, so far from being the same, are and must remain entirely distinct. Political ideals, in fact (and this quite apart from the coercive methods through which alone they can be realized), can never correspond, and for that matter ought not to correspond, with the ideals which religion sets up.

It is not necessary, in order to make the point, to elaborate

theories of the State and its functions. Certain broad statements—statements which will not be disputed, and which are sufficient for the present need—can easily be made. Clearly enough, political ideals involve on their negative side restraint of mutual harm, though this, of course, gets us no farther than a policy of mere *laissez-faire*. On their positive side, political ideals involve such an attitude on the part of one man toward another as shall prevent any hindrance to the harmonious and successful working of the whole social body; and in all probability the most advanced social reformer would claim that within the four corners of some such definition his programme can find room. Certainly it is the well-being of the *whole* that political ideals are, in their very nature, set to further; the State has no title to find out this or that individual, this or that set of individuals, and lavish upon one or the other any special favour; indeed, the idea of the "collective body" is the dominant idea in the reforming programmes of our time, and it is precisely the most eager advocates of political change who strike most insistently upon that single chord. It is not the State's business to choose out some particular man, or to press home upon its conscience the question how far it can stretch its activities in the direction of promoting his welfare. Further, for such self-sacrifice on the part of individuals as is implied in the adoption of the indicated attitude the State has a right to call, but not for any self-sacrifice other or greater than this. An individual may be summoned to subordinate his particular interests, in certain respects and up to a certain point, to the interests of the "whole"; but this demand must not be pushed too far, lest what is given to the "whole" with one hand should perchance be taken away with the other, and reform, overreaching itself in the effort to achieve an exaggerated completeness, be all undone again. As to all this there would probably be no dispute. In fine, the State has the right of calling upon each one of its members to do his duty, and other right it has none. Moreover, into the reckoning up of what this duty is there enters the question of the average moral standard of the time,

since the conception of the collective "good" and of what may be demanded for its attainment must not be stretched farther than the limit which this standard fixes; and the supreme consideration is always with how restricted a demand the situation may be met.

But this is no adequate statement of the religious ideal concerning the relations between man and man. According to the religious ideal, a man, precisely in proportion to his comprehension of what the religious ideal really is, will outrun mere obligation; minister of his substance even when he might, without incurring actual blame, withhold the grant; seek out opportunities of assisting his fellow-men rather than sit idly until an opportunity (so close and clamorous that it is no more an opportunity, but an order) is thrust upon him; work, as it were, overtime in the service of his brethren, and volunteer for tasks which he might ignore if he would. The State can do no more than summon a man to perform his duty; the man who has seen the greatness and the glory of the religious ideal knows that when he has performed his duty he is an unprofitable servant still. In a way, this is religious commonplace; all the greater pity, then, that so many, in their ardent proclamation of the supposed identity between political and religious ideals, seem to forget it. And the moment the commonplace comes into the circle of light, the proclamation, ardent as it may have been, must surely fall silent from a shamed sense of being futile and false. The man who is governed by religious ideals practises a whole range of "extra" virtues which at the same time spring from and react upon a definite religious culture, but for which the State, being what it is, has no right whatever to call. He does, one need not hesitate to say, many things which, as a matter of actual obligation, not even God has imposed upon him, but which he imposes upon himself. Over and above its strict demands, the religious ideal offers many suggestions which the religious man, in proportion to the intensity of his religiousness, will heed, even though, if he did not, no forfeiture of his religious status would be incurred. Nor does the average

moral standard, in matters of men's mutual relationships, form any part of the religious man's concern. The question with him is not how little will content the demands of the situation, but how much he can give and do without impairing the moral and spiritual reserves within his own nature on which, ultimately, his power of giving and doing depends.

Any attempt, therefore, at identifying religious and political ideals—any attempt at putting the idea of their identity into practice and using it as a guiding principle in legislative affairs—involves one of two things, or very possibly both of them together. This for the first: If religious ideals as to men's mutual relations are appreciated in all their fulness, if those who assert the oneness of religious and political ideals really seek to force the second up to the level of the first, a quite intrusive and irrelevant element is introduced into political controversy—the presence of this bringing about in its turn a by no means surprising irritation in many of the combatants, causing them to take up a much more thoroughly *non possumus* attitude than they might otherwise do, and so in the end retarding the upward movement instead of spurring it on. It is idle to blink the fact that the religious ideal does not appeal to everybody: it is idle, also, to blink the fact that those to whom it does appeal have no right whatever, as members of the body politic, to force even an outward obedience to it upon those whom it fails to win; and it is no matter for wonder if the man who is willing, or reluctantly willing, to do what the State has a real right to demand, but is in no particular hurry to do any more, should chafe—even to the point of postponing submission to the rightful demand as long as possible—when controversialists call upon the State to exercise a compulsion which it is *ultra vires* for the State to put forth. This is human nature. The hand often closes automatically when too much is asked. And it is well worth while for those who talk of the identity of political and religious ideals to ask themselves whether, by stretching the doctrine of the State's monitory rights over its members too far, they are not really retarding that progress

which all the members of the State may legitimately be called upon to further. In all probability much of the bitterness of current political controversy enters in because the presence of an irrelevant intrusion is felt and resented upon the field. Political and religious ideals are one, but if words have meaning, this signifies that the State has the right to impose upon a man, as an absolute duty, what religion itself rather suggests than commands. Little wonder that not a few men make angry protest against what is really an injustice in religious guise.

Alternatively with this—or concurrently with this, for, in point of fact, both results stand out clearly for those who have eyes to see—the theory of identity between political and religious ideals, the effort at making the theory good, involves an actual degradation of religion, a dulling of religious aspiration in the real sense, a growing forgetfulness of what religion is. Between the two results, indeed, a real connection exists. We have noted that to press the theory makes political controversy more acute. Under that increased acuteness of controversy it becomes clear that the theory cannot really be pushed to its end ; yet the theory, having been started, must be maintained ; and the way of escape from the dilemma lies in abating the demands which the theory is supposed to make. So, while an endeavour is still made to force the political ideal to the higher level, the religious ideal steps down from its throne to meet it as it comes. The psychological process is natural enough, and may easily enough go on unrecognized by the nature in which is its home. From the assertion that political and religious ideals are one, it is an easy step (with practical conditions, so to say, pushing from behind) to the assertion, or at least to the inarticulate feeling, that religion has no other ideals than these which can, and that with so much difficulty, be embodied in readjustments of the social state by political means. And, indeed, the definite assertion has been heard not seldom in recent years. It is not surprising that, if religious ideals are to be embodied in the political sphere, any constituents of the religious ideal as hitherto cherished to which circumstances will

not grant such embodiment—all those "extra" virtues spoken of before—should be, by the instinctive desire of the human mind for consistency, relegated to the background and ignored. They will not fit into the scheme. They cannot be packed, as it were, into the one vehicle wherein everything we are going to take with us must find room. And naturally, then, that definite religious culture—that movement of man's nature back and forth upon the greatness of God's, to take in and give out again whatever of God's nature it can—out of which these "extra" virtues come and upon which they react, tends to be neglected more and more. For the source of what is but secondary must, of course, be but secondary itself. So religion presses out from the centre to the circumference, from the inward to the outward—not, as is fondly imagined, to *take in* the circumference and the outward as additions to its range of influence, but to *leave* the centre and the inward behind, relinquishing there the grasp it once possessed. So there fades out of religion spiritual passion, aspiration, prayer. So does religion become Materialism's ally and minister. There is no need to dwell on the evidence that this process is going on in the religious world to-day. The fact is patent to any unprejudiced observer who will go below the surface and put himself to the trouble of a little hour's careful watch. The strangest thing, from this point of view, is that those who most loudly make the demand for a realization of religious ideals within the political sphere do so because of their professed desire (of course, a desire quite sincerely felt) to make religion a more powerful thing, a thing of wider range, and therefore a thing surer of its place, in the modern world. "Say that political and religious ideals are entirely distinct, and you make religion such a small, limited, inactive affair, out of all relation to the practical concerns of life!" so runs the cry. Well, one need not stand on the defensive here. Rather may one fling a counter-challenge, and say: "It is your theory of oneness between political and religious ideals that reduces religion's range, restricts its view, changes it into no more than a morality which weighs itself out

in a grain-by-grain miser's fashion, turns it forcibly away from those infinite sources whence larger and more generous activities might flow!" The upholders of the theory may go forth, as they believe and declare, as champions to vindicate for religion a place in the modern world. But they fight with hands which they themselves have fettered, with weapons to which they themselves have given a blunted edge. If religion be forced into such a wedlock as is implied in the doctrine that political and religious ideals are one, then it cannot be but that religion will wear less shining robes and maintain less royal state than she did, and, for the sake of an apparent immediate practicality, forfeit much both of that intrinsic imperiousness and of that intimate communion with what is hidden behind the veil, which made her so great before.

What has to be faced, in fine, is the fact that the influence of religion in the political sphere must be for the most part indirect. It is not suggested for a moment that such an influence may not exist. "Then you contend" (so runs the usual objection to such ideas as have here been advanced) "that religion must remain without influence upon politics, that it cannot elevate political ideals at all?" Not so. The contention is that the connection of religious and political ideals must be indirect, and, further, that it need be no less real for that. Of course, the presence upon the political field of the man inspired by religious ideals is all through assumed. It may be as well to say it, spite of its obviousness, since a charge to the contrary is the handy stone so many have accustomed themselves to fling. There is no implication that the man who elevates religious ideals above political is out of place in the political arena. The opposite implication, indeed, is the one that naturally emerges. It is assumed that he takes his political place. And through the presence and spread of religion in and by means of religiously inspired personalities there must inevitably come a raising of that average moral standard upon which legislation depends, and which legislation cannot in the last resort outstrip. If religious ideals as to men's social relationships, attitudes,

ministries, be cherished; if, still more, they be voluntarily put into practice by those who profess to hold them, the conception of those relationships and attitudes and ministries, as it is framed in the community's general sentiment, becomes nobler; for a little leaven leavens the whole lump, even though at the lump's outer edges the leavening be less marked than at the centre. In fact, it is just those dominated by ideals impossible of realization there who do the best service—albeit, perhaps, an unrecognized one—upon the political field. One of the most valuable forces in politics is the force of those who see what politics *cannot* do. Whatever direct and immediate political service lies within their power they will perform with at least as much zeal as anyone else. But it is by them that the range of political possibilities spreads out more widely. Within them dwells their secret; and while that secret will not proclaim itself upon the political housetops, nor seek to make itself part of the ordinary political stock-in-trade, something of its magnetism will go out from it to many who, all unknowing, touch the hem of its robe. And the true political influence and service of the Church is to send into the political field men who have the call of more than political ideals sounding in their ears, and who realize that, let political ideals go far as they may, religious ideals will still be beckoning from shining heights ahead.

Impatience with all this is often noble. But it is mistaken nevertheless. And though the contrary view may temporarily—for the hour in which enthusiasm for a Kingdom of Heaven set up by violence blinds the eyes—seem more attractive, yet just in proportion to a man's sense of the religious call will he feel in the end that the stated view is indisputably true. Religious and political ideals are fundamentally distinct, and under this present "dispensation" (if one may recoin a word from the old theological mint, and give it another value) must so remain. And it is in the interests of both political and religious progress that they should be so conceived. For—to close on a paradoxical note—the recognition of their distinctness is the surest way to bring about the utmost possible approximation of the two.

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