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MONASTIC CHARITY AND POOR RELIEF IN EARLY TUDOR ENGLAND.

By F. D. Cope.

THE contention often maintained by Roman Catholic historians that it was the Dissolution of the Monasteries which, by abolishing the monastic "dole," created the need for a system of poor relief in this country, has long held the field. During the present century, however, there has been on the part of an increasing number of historians a reaction against this view. The researches of writers like Professor Savine, R. H. Tawney, G. G. Coulton, and others have disclosed the existence of a state of affairs rather different from that hitherto supposed. The main opinion held by these newer expositors is that monasticism had begun to decline in its duty to the poor long before the Dissolution loomed into view; that, at the time of its occurrence, the monasteries were in such an effete condition as to be practically useless as instruments of social amelioration. The mere mention of dates alone lends some colour to this idea. The first measure relating to the provision of relief for the poor was passed in 1388 (12 Richard II, c. 3 and c. 7). The Dissolution did not take place until 1537. What was happening in this interval of over 150 years?

To answer this question it will be necessary to trace briefly the history of attempts to institute poor relief. Until the fourteenth century almost all charitable endowments had been in the hands of ecclesiastics—chiefly monastic. From this time onward, however, there was a growing disinclination to leave them solely in the care of the Church. Secular claims and interests were beginning to come to the fore; and, in addition to the interference of the State, the gilds had gradually evolved systems for providing for their own poor. Referring to the gilds of this period, Professor 'Ashley says:

". . . the various associations began to provide lodgings for destitute members; and from hiring a couple of cottages they proceeded, with the help of legacies for the purpose, to erect almshouses with accommodation for a dozen or more members." [1]

"Beginning, probably with the religious gilds, the practice of maintaining almshouses spread to the crafts. During the course of the fifteenth century all the more important companies in London erected such establishments. The inmates appear at first to have been given nothing but shelter; but further bequests enabled them to receive a regular weekly allowance." [2]

The Act of 1388 is regarded by many as the first English poor-law, for it did what the monasteries had failed to do, differentiated between the impotent poor and the sturdy able-bodied beggars who wandered at large, a curse to the country. But its provisions

[1] *Economic History and Theory*, Book II, ch. v, p. 325.
[2] Ibid., p. 326.

—especially that restricting the labourer to his village—were too severe to be enforced. Indeed, all the earlier poor relief methods were far too repressive in character. And the great growth of poverty which characterized this period called for further and more discriminating measures. In 1495, therefore, an Act was passed which reduced the penalty for vagrancy to three days in the stocks. This was followed in the same year by another, which enabled more consideration to be shown to certain classes of beggars, who were given permission to beg from place to place. In 1531 this principle was extended, licenses to beg being issued. It was not, however, until the year of the abolition of the smaller monasteries (1536) that there came the first systematic attempt to raise funds for poor relief purposes. These were raised by means of a rate collected by the Churchwardens of each parish. This (in theory) was optional, but in practice pressure was put upon those parishioners who objected to paying. Thus, from the time of the Peasants' Revolt until Elizabeth, there was a series of poor-law enactments which in practice met with varying success. It should be noted that this development of schemes for providing poor-relief was mainly secular in origin. The Church at this time falls into the background as an institution for relieving the poverty which was the curse of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. This is surprising when it is remembered that "Catholic" apologists, both of the Roman and Anglo varieties, have long belauded that aspect of medieval life which found its expression in monasticism. They have painted in rich and glowing colours the idealism of the monastic life; the saintliness of the monks, who, in the seclusion of the cloister, kept alive the spirit of culture and learning inherited from the defunct Roman Empire. Above all, they praise their kindness to the sick and poor as an attempt to put into practice the social implications of the Gospel of Christ. This view of monasticism has been carefully fostered by such writers as Cobbett, Father Gasquet, Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, the latter of whom so picturesquely describes the monasteries as "The inns of God where no man paid, that were the walls of the weak," and would have us believe that the Dissolution let loose upon England the floodtide of a relentless social tyranny. This view of the functions of the monasteries and of the effects of their dissolution has, in fact, little or no historical foundation. It is perfectly true that, in their early days, the monasteries did render very valuable services to both the spiritual and the material sides of the life of the community. As in all human achievements, however, there followed a period of stagnation and decay. This, coupled with the growth of secular institutions, rendered the need for monasticism less real. Long before the Dissolution we find that the ideals of piety and self-abnegation which had animated the earlier monks had largely disappeared.

On the material side also, there was a rapid decline.

"Everywhere as the period progresses," says Snape in his *English Monastic Finances in the Later Middle Ages*, "we see a withdrawal of the monasteries

from an active share in the management of the sources of their income. The practice of farming everything out grows more and more common . . . in every direction the same thing went on; tithes were farmed out, mills were farmed out, every source of income was transferred to the hands of some outsider and the monks simply subsided into the position of men receiving rents" (ch. III, p. 94).

Such was the condition of a monastery like Battle Abbey, which, according to the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, owned twenty-two manors, twenty-one of which were let out for cultivation by tenant farmers. As landlords, the monastic establishments were, alas! no better than the secular folk. Against the picture of the monks as " . . . the shaven men, that had been quaint and kind " drawn for us by the imagination of G. K. Chesterton, must be placed the contemporary opinion of Sir Thomas More. " Holy men enclose land, convert arable to pasture, claim villeins, turn copyholds into tenancies at will."[1] And again,

" The view sometimes expressed that the religious houses had been easier landlords than the lay owners into whose hands their estates passed, though it can occasionally be corroborated from the complaints made by tenants to the Government, scarcely seems, as yet, to be satisfactorily proved."[2]

An interesting example of the enmity which existed between the laity and the monastic orders is given by Froude in his *Annals of an English Abbey*. Briefly, the matter was as follows. The Abbot of St. Albans demanded that the townsmen should full their cloth and grind their corn at the monastery, at fees to be fixed by him. This tyranny they resented and on presenting their case at the secular courts, it was lost, with the result that they had to " purchase forgiveness by a present of wine." An incident of this kind shows the attitude of the laity towards the monks.

In regard to almsgiving it must not be forgotten that the amount distributed by the monasteries was really very small in comparison with their incomes. In the case of a large establishment like Bolton Priory, only $\frac{1}{280}$th to $\frac{1}{170}$th of the income was given in alms, and even if such items as tips to the servants of the great men who were frequent visitors to such establishments, be included, the amount expended was only $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. to $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. of the total income.[3] And, even if the food and agricultural produce distributed to the poor be included, as well as actual cash, the results do not appear to show any very great munificence on the part of the monks. Another point which is frequently overlooked is that many of the monasteries were holders of money and land bequeathed to them by will on condition that they distributed a certain sum yearly to the poor. This was not a voluntary self-denial. It was a disbursement of funds earmarked for a specific purpose, which, if used for any other, would have been a breach of trust. Of the spontaneous charity which has endeared the memory of the monks

[1] *Utopia*. Quoted by Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 382.

[2] *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 380–81.

[3] Burton's *Monasticon Eboracense*, quoted by Snape in his *English Monastic Finances in the Later Middle Ages* (pp. 112–13).

to successive generations, there is not so much evidence as might be desired.

From the time of the Black Death, changing social conditions and fluctuating prices had possibly something to do with the decline of monasticism. Even, however, when due allowance is made for these factors, the fact remains that there was an all-round falling-off in monastic efficiency which continued right up to the Dissolution. On the eve of this event, however, the monasteries still remained a potent material force. Their financial position, in particular, was in many cases very strong. It is calculated that in 1535 their annual net temporal income was £109,786; and the net income from all sources exceeded £136,000.[1] To bring these figures to modern value (pre-war) they must be multiplied by about twelve. Measured in terms of modern value, therefore, the monasteries were worth an annual income of over one and a half millions; and by the same measure their total capital was in the region of twenty millions.[2]

Such wealth was bound to attract the avaricious attentions of those who had tasted the riches to be obtained from sheep-farming, for it is unfortunately true that those who planned the Dissolution were not actuated solely by ideas of reform. The age was one of rapid commercial expansion, and such is rarely one in which the element of greed is lacking.

Were, however, the monastic landlords any better than those who despoiled them? The evidence available certainly does not suggest that they were. Besides, the monasteries had been founded for a specific purpose, and now that the need for that purpose had largely vanished, or had passed into other hands, their continued existence could no longer be justified on the grounds of public utility or of spiritual value. It had grown beyond their power to ameliorate the social conditions of early sixteenth-century England. By the indiscrimination of the little charity that was disbursed they stimulated beggary rather than relieved want. As Professor Ashley remarks, "The Dissolution,—for the method of which no language of condemnation can be too strong—had at least this good result that it abolished a number of centres of pauperization."[3] And the fact remains, unwelcome though it must be to the admirers of medieval monasticism, that the monasteries had degenerated into huge corporations which possessed land and money to an extent altogether out of proportion to any service that they rendered to the community. Nor did this apply to the monasteries alone among ecclesiastical foundations. Even so ardent a Roman Catholic apologist as Mr. Hilaire Belloc makes the significant admission in regard to this period:

"that all over Europe not only monastic revenue, but the whole economic framework of ecclesiastical endowment was out of gear. . . . The revenues

[1] Savine's *English Monasteries on the Eve of the Dissolution*, p. 100.
[2] Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 310, note 5.
[3] *Economic History and Theory*, Book II, ch. v, p. 317.

of a bishopric, of a parish church, of a monastery, even of a hospital or college, had come in an increasing number of cases to be a dead piece of wealth which the laity as well as the clergy of the day regarded not quite as we do stocks and shares, but almost as unspiritually." [1]

The growing unpopularity of the monks with the commercial classes, from whom the nobility of Tudor England were recruited, made them an easy object of attack. Among the lower classes, too, the reverence for monasticism had waned. The day had passed when the monks could command the awe of a superstitious and ignorant peasantry. It is very significant that, during the reaction under Mary, no attempt was made to restore the monasteries, or to revive monastic charity, or to restore the monastic lands to their former owners. This alone shows that the love for the old religion did not stretch to the point of relinquishing material gains. Most of the money went to found great families like the Russells and the Cavendishes.

This must be the answer to those who maintain that the Dissolution was a national disaster; or who would seek to defend the monasteries on the ground of their services to the poor. It is true that the Dissolution was often cruelly and clumsily carried out, and that thereby much suffering was caused to many of the evicted monks. But the methods by which the Dissolution was carried out can be held no excuse for the uselessness of the monasteries.

To what, then, must be attributed the great growth of poverty and social ills which occurred contemporaneously with the Dissolution? The answer is to be found in the changing economic and social conditions of the times. Feudalism, which had been for centuries the structure of medieval society, had received its deathblow and was giving place—in many cases had given place—to the social system under which we live at the present day. The chief difference in the change from medieval to modern is to be found in the changed tenure of land, which became valuable as an instrument of production and an investment for money rather than as a source of men and materials for war. Under feudalism each man, be he lord or peasant, had his appointed place in society, with appropriate rights and duties. "The lord," said Beaumanoir the medieval jurist, "is quite as much bound to be faithful to his man, as the latter is bound in regard to his lord." [2]

The gradual disintegration of feudalism changed this ideal. Personal service and dependence upon one's superiors gave place to the cash nexus and a greater sense of independence on the part of the individual.

In our own country, this change was complicated by the problems involved in the rapid growth of the wool trade, as unemployment was greatly increased when arable land was turned into pasture for sheep, much fewer persons being engaged on a sheep farm than in agriculture. From the time of Edward III the production of wool had been the staple English industry. During the

[1] *How the Reformation Happened*, ch. iv, pp. 111–12.
[2] Quoted by Hattersley, *Short History of Western Europe* (ch. v. p, 70).

latter half of the fifteenth century there had occurred a further development. England now exported great quantities of woollen goods as well as the raw material. Its growth may be gauged by the fact that in 1354 the exports of cloth amounted to 5,000 pieces; on the accession of Henry VIII (1509) it had risen to 80,000, and rose to over 120,000 at the end of his reign. This increased production of wool meant that more pastures must be found, and, for that, land divided on the old feudal system of strips was useless. Hence, to provide new pastures, sheep-farmers, seized with a "get-rich-quick" spirit not peculiar to their age, began to enclose the waste lands which had belonged to the village communities for generations. These, as well as arable lands, were turned into sheep pasture with all speed.

In a few instances, these enclosures were to the benefit of the peasantry but, on the whole, they were inimical to their interests. The peasants were despoiled of their lands; and rents were raised. The immediate effects of these changes was to cause a great increase in poverty. Whole families were evicted from their holdings and much suffering resulted. Sir Thomas More in the first book of *Utopia* tells us:

"Your sheep . . . which are usually so tame and so cheaply fed, are now, it is said, so greedy and wild, that they devour men and lay waste and depopulate fields, houses and towns. For in those parts of the realm where the finest and therefore the most costly wool is produced, these nobles and gentlemen, and even holy Abbots, not satisfied with the revenues and annual profits derived from their estates, and not content with leading an idle life and doing no good to the country, but rather doing it harm, leave no ground to be tilled, but enclose every bit of land for pasture, pull down houses and destroy towns, leaving only the church to pen the sheep in." [1]

The class above the peasants, the yeomanry, corresponding to our middle classes, then, as now, the backbone of the community, were also badly hit by the enclosures and rising rents. Bishop Latimer, in his first sermon preached before King Edward VI, has left us an interesting record of this class. "My father was a yeoman," he said, "and had no lands of his own; only he had a farm of three or four pounds by year at the uttermost, and hereupon he tilled as much as kept half-a-dozen men. He had walk for a hundred sheep and my mother milked thirty kine. . . ." Later in the sermon he told of the great increase in rents, so that "he that now hath it payeth sixteen pound by year or more."

When the evil effects of enclosing and rent-raising became apparent, several Acts of Parliament were passed to prohibit it. In 1504 the matter was dealt with in a Royal Proclamation, further legislation being passed. As a result of an inquiry held in 1517 measures were taken against land-owners who enclosed their lands. The results, however, were slight. Fines were levied on the offending land-owners, but the law tended to degenerate into a means of raising revenue, rather than a bar to further enclosing.

Contributary causes of the great increase in poverty were the

[1] Richard's translation into Modern English, p. 13.

bad harvests of the first two decades of the sixteenth century, which caused an increase in the price of wheat and rye. In addition, there were the repeated debasement of the coinage, the heavy taxation, due to war, and the glut of gold and silver from the New World.

The growth of luxury and extravagance among the upper classes also made the problem more difficult. The desire for a more luxurious standard of living led to exactions on the part of those who rendered no useful service to the community, and were a hindrance to the national well-being. Beggary at one end of the social scale and parasitism at the other, in Tudor England, divided class from class in a manner of which we can have no conception at the present day.

" Now there is a great number of noblemen, who not only live idle themselves like drones on the labours of others, as for instance the tenants of their estates, whom they squeeze to the utmost by raising their rents (for it is the only economy they know of, being otherwise so extravagant as to bring themselves to want), but also carry about with them a huge crowd of followers who have never learnt a trade for a livelihood." [1]

It was to these social and economic changes, especially the sheep farming, that the poverty and vagrancy of the early sixteenth century were due; and not as successive generations of partisan historians have tried to maintain, to the effects of the Dissolution. This false impression would never have arisen, but for the habit of blackening everything connected with the advent of Protestantism in this country, and making it out to be an unmitigated curse both to the nation and the individual. This has led to the confounding of a religious with an economic revolution. These, as Professor Tawney points out, were brother and sister, not parent and child.[2] The transfer of the monastic lands immediately after the Dissolution possibly accentuated for a time the prevailing social distress, but it is doubtful whether it had any long standing effect of this kind when once the new conditions had adjusted themselves.

There is thus no proof at all for the long-exploded dictum of Cobbett that " viewed merely in its social aspect, the English Reformation was in reality the rising of the rich against the poor." As Dr. Coulton remarks, it " will not bear even a moment's comparison with the facts of medieval history." [3]

No doubt to the monk, despoiled of the shelter of the monastery, to the corrodian deprived of his pension, the Dissolution must have been staggering. It must have seemed a veritable *Dies Irae*, as indeed it was of the narrow world bounded by the monastic walls. But to the larger nation to come, the land of Shakespeare, Drake and Burleigh, it was but a stage in the progress toward the contentment and prosperity of Elizabethan England.

[1] More's *Utopia*, Richard's translation into Modern English, pp. 10–11.
[2] *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 382.
[3] *The Medieval Village*, p. 379.