

JUSTICE AND RELIGION

Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.—Amos 5:24.

The world today is moving between the urgency of two extremes. On the one hand are those who would have us leave all things as they are. On the other hand, the apostle of violence would shatter the physical fabric of civilization with high-power explosives.

The world will adopt neither of these alternatives. It will not stand still and preserve the *status quo*; nor will it follow the lead of the dynamiter. But it will presently discover that the call of the future is along the path of moderation.

Middle ground is the public destiny—not mere compromise, which settles nothing, but the genuine adjustment between conflicting interests which recognizes the inherent claims of all human beings and results in justice. For that is the real nature of justice: an adjustment which weighs all factors and which inclines toward the exclusive claim of no single class or interest.

Justice is not a thing to be laid hold of suddenly; nor is it handed out from the clouds. It

is a gradual discovery. Various fractions of justice have been realized through the struggles of the past. The time was when arbitrary theories of government ruled the world. The masses of men were controlled by a specially privileged upper class. But one privilege after another has been abolished. Divine kingly right and absolute rule have given way to representative democracy and popular legislation; chattel slavery has been wiped out; women are being emancipated; and so the process goes on. Justice comes not abruptly. Its dawn is gradual; and we are yet living in its morning hour.

The struggle for justice grips the feelings and appeals to the heart. It is a religious matter. The power of religion broke the tyranny of the Stuarts in Britain and the manacles of the slave in America. What is more, the modern school of scientific biblical interpretation is helping us to see that the book which all our churches venerate as holy has grown out of the first great victory over injustice in the history of the world. The struggle among the Hebrews for the worship of the One God, as opposed to the cults of the many gods, was not a mere theological contest between certain wise people who served a real God and certain foolish people who served unreal gods. It was a warfare between the principles of justice

and injustice. This startling truth has only begun to be realized in religious circles. The rise of monotheism and the downfall of polytheism spelled the triumph of the plain people over aristocracy.

This is the fundamental meaning of the revolution which is now sweeping over theological seminaries and churches. At once dreaded and welcomed, modern biblical scholarship sets the struggle for justice in its true historical perspective. Not only did Amos and his fellow-prophets cry, "Let justice roll down as waters"; but this was to be the work of the Messiah himself, as foreshadowed in the utmost visions of exalted prophecy:

He shall bring forth justice to the nations.
He shall not fail nor be discouraged
Till he have set justice in the earth;
And the isles shall wait for his law [Isa., chap. 42].

Three chapters have been thus far disclosed in the evolution of biblical religion: first, the struggle among the Hebrews for the worship of One God as against the worship of many gods—ending in the victory of monotheism; secondly, the struggle, which has cut through Jewish, Roman, and Protestant churches alike, over the question *how* the One God should be worshiped—ending in the victory of justice and morality over

dogma and ritual as the foundations of religion; thirdly, the new struggle, upon which we are now entering, with reference to the nature of justice itself—whether it be “social” or “individual.”

The social gospel carries with it the suggestion that we need something more than a merely “personal” salvation. It raises opposition to the older and more familiar thought, emphasized by the religion of our ancestors, that individual righteousness alone will save the world. It is against the old, narrow, selfish gospel of “individualism,” which reigned supreme a generation ago, both within and without the church. The social awakening, therefore, is a movement involving tremendous possibilities in the field of religion.

Within recent years, the people have more and more turned away from the church because it has been identified with a platform which has failed to meet the increasing pressure of our time. The church has denounced the shortcomings of men in their private lives; but it has not flamed with high enthusiasm for the righting of social wrongs.

In the meanwhile, however, the church has gradually become conscious that religion has been presented in too narrow a form, and that the Bible has a deep sociological meaning which has not hitherto been fathomed. As a consequence,

the churches are now being drawn into the tide of a new revival; and they are becoming community centers instead of arenas for theological controversy.

In the degree that the church broadens its appeal, reaching back to the fulness of its biblical foundation, and emphasizing the neglected social aspect of the gospel—in the degree that it does this, it is again winning popular attention and sympathy. For the people are “incurably” religious.

When we hear, for the first time, that the victory of biblical monotheism over the worship of many gods was the first great triumph of democracy over aristocracy and injustice, we exclaim, “But how can that be? The Bible is concerned only with *religion!*” We have, indeed, been trained so long to think of religion as a ghostly, unearthly matter, that the real meaning of the Bible has been obscured, and we have turned away with unseeing eyes from the most thrilling chapters of human experience.

If the religion of the Bible has this public, social meaning, then the church truly has within itself the seeds of the redemption of mankind. Sociological interpretation of the Bible gives us a key to religious history from ancient times up to the present epoch of struggle and unrest. The

“orthodoxy” of the last generation is increasingly discredited. And while the new biblical scholarship has been thus far shut up in the schools, it is now passing out of the academic field and taking root in the soil of popular thought.