

JUSTICE *VERSUS* INDIVIDUALISM

Plain, old-fashioned individual righteousness—or social justice? The issue of our time is not yet understood by the majority. But increasing millions are on the alert; and every day brings the merits of public questions more clearly into view. We are in a kind of nightmare, passing through the agony of a transition which is confusing and painful. We hear more and more about “sociology” and the “social gospel.” These terms excite distrust and aversion in some quarters; but they bring cheer to a growing host.

The problem of today is both religious and secular. Not only does it affect the church, but it profoundly stirs the world at large. The social awakening is the paramount fact of our age; but it is viewed from different angles inside and outside the church. The situation amid which we live comes logically out of the long evolution sketched in the foregoing chapters, and can be understood to advantage only as it is interpreted from the historical standpoint.

Having at length reached a center on moral ground, the church is entering upon a struggle

over the meaning of morality itself. What are "justice" and "righteousness"? These terms are large and important; but what do they really and actually mean? Approaching the matter from a religious point of view, we ask, What does God want when he demands moral rectitude? This question, indeed, raises the problem of God's nature, and carries us into the field of liberal theology. But from the purely secular standpoint the issue turns around the struggle between those who hold that the world is to be saved by personal righteousness and those who contend for "social justice." Yet the secular and religious problems are, in fact, one and the same.

When we are facing the wrongness in human life, our first and most natural tendency is to seek its cause in personal sins and shortcomings. We are prone to believe that moral evil arises only from the bad will of sinners. Most of us are keen to find some person or persons whom we can blame for something. Hence, we have done a great deal in trying to reform, correct, improve, convert, and save *individuals*.

In this common tendency, we find the secret of the older church gospel of personal salvation. Let the sinner mend his ways and do right. Let everyone be good. Then, when everybody is converted, the world will be saved. According

to this view, God is looked upon as demanding only a narrow, conventional sort of rectitude, which can be quietly achieved by the private citizen. The problem of sin is to be solved either by the self-reformation of the sinner, or by a supernatural act of divine grace—in any event, morality is a purely individual matter, secured by a change in the sinner himself.

This gospel of salvation is “orthodox”; but it is not *biblical*. It does not bring into view those problems of wealth and poverty and land monopoly which Jesus and the Hebrew prophets raised. A conventional, orthodox evangelist or preacher, of the Moody type, urging sinners to repentance, does not bring up the social problem of class relations between rich and poor. Religion with him is only a personal thing. And while, in a sense, he may be right in saying that the biblical treatment of sin is also personal, this consideration does not affect our point. For, if modern orthodoxy and the ancient religion of the Bible are the same, why, then, have not orthodox preachers raised the questions emphasized by the prophets and by Jesus? As Bishop Charles D. Williams, of the Episcopal diocese of Michigan, writes, the church “preaches, for the most part, a narrow and petty round of ethics and the minor moralities of purely personal conduct, respectabilities,

good form, technical pieties, and ecclesiastical proprieties."¹

The reason for this is that all orthodox theology was developed under the influence of the upper social classes, which, as a rule, have not wanted the subject of property to be brought into any sort of connection with religion. The individualistic tendency in morals has coincided with the self-interest of the dominant class in society. Nevertheless, this overshadowing of the social problem by orthodoxy has not been due to some deep conspiracy between the church and the wealthy. The situation has grown out of normal, sincere, human tendencies. When the late J. P. Morgan, for instance, entertained certain bishops of the Episcopal church, and invited them to travel in his private car, he was not consciously bribing them to shut their eyes to the social problem and preach a gospel of personal salvation. For both Morgan and the bishops were sincere individualists and were raised in that way of thinking. All talk of a "conspiracy" between wealth and the church is beside the mark. The evolution does not evolve in that *way*.

But over against the narrow, selfish doctrine of personal salvation there has lately come a broader vision of redemption. The church, in

¹ *American Magazine*, June, 1911.

response to the logic of its origin, is returning gradually and steadily to its biblical foundation. The new biblical scholarship, firmly established in the leading divinity schools, now shapes the views of many thousands of clergymen, and greatly influences the laity. Present-day preaching begins to revolve about the moral questions of wealth and poverty which play so commanding a part in the Bible. The tones of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus are beginning to be heard in the pulpit.

And yet, the issue is not clearly before us. We have hardly adjusted ourselves to the modern method of biblical interpretation before we are called upon to make terms with the "social awakening." Why must these movements crowd each other so closely? The answer is that they are not independent facts, but elements of the same vast upheaval which reverberates all through civilization today. The new conviction of our age is that injustice comes, not merely from personal sin, but from defective social arrangements. The established "system" in which we live not only hampers the individual in his outreach for morality, but the tragedy of it is that if we all followed the dictates of righteousness in our own private lives the defective social system would remain the same. In other words, we cannot

have justice on a foundation of merely personal morality. This is the new radical insight.

The antagonism between the claims of individual morality and social righteousness becomes more pronounced as we move onward. Discussion grows more vigorous and heated; but still, the majority are not certain about the nature of the issue. Let us take a very simple and homely illustration: You are on a crowded car, hanging to a strap; and as the car jerks along a fellow-passenger accidentally steps on your shoe. Your first and most natural tendency is to blame him personally. He is careless; and he ought to be more thoughtful and considerate. But on second thought you know that his conduct with reference to you is determined, in part at least, by defective social arrangements. It is possibly true that, with more care, he might not have interfered with your comfort. Nevertheless, you know that there is another problem here. No matter how careful everybody in the car is, the trouble will never be set right until the external, physical relations between the passengers have been reformed, and they all have room and a chance to be decent.

Carry this figure over into civilization as a whole. We are all journeying through life on a conveyance known as the earth. Those who

believe in personal salvation as the only remedy for the ills of mankind exhort their fellow-passengers to be careful, kind, considerate, righteous, moral, and just. According to this view, the problem of the world is entirely spiritual and *internal*. The remedy for all evils in society is to be found in the betterment of the individual. But, on the other hand, the social reformer calls attention to external conditions and laws which profoundly affect the relations of people to each other, and which hamper and restrict them in their efforts to be just.

Today we are in the midst of a sharp reaction against the old, conventional individualism. Even those who do not see the meaning of the new tidal movement in thought are constrained by it. Programs looking toward economic and political reform are coming rapidly into favor. Socialism already numbers millions of adherents, and has enlisted beneath its banner many clergymen who have definitely and finally broken with the orthodox teaching of a merely personal salvation as the only cure for the world's troubles. Another interesting reform is well represented by the clergyman whom we quoted above, Bishop Charles D. Williams, of Michigan, who for years has advocated the single tax on land values. His rather uncomplimentary characterization of

the older ecclesiastical doctrine of salvation proceeds from the standpoint of the single tax philosophy, which he holds with deep religious fervor.

When we look around us at the changes which have taken place in the last few years, it is indeed surprising to see how the older, orthodox idea of morality is disappearing, and how the social problems raised by the Bible are coming steadily to the front. This is not simply a change in the field of organized religion. It is a development in which the church is involved as part of a larger transformation extending all through the social fabric. The long delay in the emergence of the social point of view seems hard to explain at first; but the reason for the vigorous persistence of individualism down to the present generation is very simple.

We saw that the rise of Protestantism was complicated by the pressure of the land question. The masses of the people in Europe have been for centuries under the rule of a landed nobility, whose tyranny was one of the chief causes leading to the settlement of the Western Hemisphere. When European immigrants first reached America, they found a vast expanse of cheap and fertile soil over which no hereditary aristocracy held sway. There was enough land for all; and if the

settler was not content with his lot in the place where he happened to be, he could move elsewhere and make a new start.

In the presence of opportunities for making a living such as had never been seen before, the natural individualism of the human mind has been developed in America to a high degree. For several generations there were no very poor and no very rich, while the problem of a large unemployed class was unknown. In the rush of economic progress, America paid little attention to anything but the material side of life. American religious, political, and economic ideas have been essentially those of Europe transplanted to the New World. America's tradition of liberty has grown and flourished, not because of any mental superiority over the European peoples, but because of *cheap land*, which, until recently, has made it possible for millions to work out their destiny independent of an upper class which holds the soil by hereditary right. Not only has the presence of industrial opportunity given the plain people a chance, and thus made America individualistic; but the Western Hemisphere itself has acted as a kind of safety-valve for Europe, drawing off the discontented and explosive elements, and partially relieving the social problem in the Old World.

During the last half-century, however, conditions in the Western Hemisphere have greatly changed. Although there is enough land in America to provide opportunities for many times its present population, this land is held out of use at rising prices far beyond the reach of the plain people. Our fiscal methods, invented by the aristocracy of Europe, lay heavy taxes upon the actual *use* and improvement of the earth, while at the same time putting so light a burden upon the practice of holding the earth *idle*, that speculators can afford to withdraw the larger part of the continent from immediate productive service. Industrial opportunities of all kinds are now greatly restricted. The independent farming class, which once characterized the United States, is melting away. Young people in the agricultural districts, being unable to buy land, are thus forced to start in life as renters. Hence, farm tenantry is increasing by leaps and bounds.

That America is fast reproducing the social problems of Europe is proved by the United States Industrial Commission in its report to Congress. Indeed, common observation shows that property is concentrating in fewer and fewer hands, that clashes between working people and their employers are becoming more frequent, that great combinations are tightening their grip on the

industrial field, and that the cost of living has been going up fast. In view of these conditions, the old cry for a purely personal morality loses much of its force. Charity organization stands hopeless before the swelling tide of poverty and crime. The people at large are more and more conscious of the social problem; but public opinion has not yet been able to crystallize around comprehensive plans of reform.

Now that the social problem is coming into the foreground of religion, it is clear that if we think of God as demanding only *personal* righteousness, then religion at once becomes a force to be wielded by conservatives who seek to turn the people's minds away from great public issues. If justice be only a matter of narrow, individual rectitude, then the church becomes a rock of defense for the interests of political and economic reaction.

But, on the other hand, if righteousness be something more and greater than individualism, then the moral law strikes with swift logic into the social structure of civilization. And in the same way that God has written his laws into the physical universe, leaving them to be discovered and applied by man, *so there must be a divine law of justice written into the very substance and constitution of human society, awaiting discovery and*

application. Social evils persist because we have not found out the natural laws of community life.

The religious and social struggle of our day is virtually a contest between two Gods, in which the war of Jehovah and Baal is fought over again within the terms of modern experience. The Individualist God stands for a narrow, selfish conception of duty and conduct. The social God stands for a wide-reaching, altruistic ideal of divine fatherhood and human brotherhood, slowly attained through the lessons of history. Which of these ideals is in harmony with the fundamental nature of things? Which God shall unfurl his banner over the advancing host of civilization?

If the issue is to be decided in favor of the social gospel, organized religion will not thereby stand committed to any particular scheme of social reform. Church members may do as they please in regard to such matters. But the church itself must provide common ground where the people may find inspiration to service, and where civic righteousness may be considered from all points of view in a spirit of kindly fraternalism.

That the story of religion, as told in this little book, has largely turned around problems which are spoken of as "materialistic" we would not attempt to deny. But the question arises, Can

the supreme purpose of human history be simply the development of a just, social system, in which the good things of this world are more fairly distributed? Is the paramount object of life the mere getting of material justice—the mere solving of those economic problems which figure so conspicuously in human existence? If so, why does justice wait, as the centuries roll by? And what of the generations that come and go, and the millions who perish in darkness along the way?

No; the fundamental purpose of life must go beyond these things. The struggle for justice is but one phase of a still wider struggle which covers life as a whole, and which is the condition of every achievement. Our present existence itself—with its brevity and its unsatisfied longing—suggests that life must have a transcendent meaning which embraces within its mighty scope all struggles of the past, the present, and the future. This consideration takes us at once into the spiritual realm. Our life here can have no meaning for us unless it be a fraction of immortality.

Standing amid the clamor and confusion of the present age, and looking back over the road we have traveled, we see the Bible and the church coming into view along the line of conflict between democracy and aristocracy. The progress of religion moves across the centuries through the

din of warfare between despotism and freedom: first, the struggle of the One God against the false gods of graft and special privilege; secondly, the struggle as to how the One God shall be served, whether by dogma and ritual or by justice and righteousness; thirdly, the struggle now going on around the question whether we shall interpret righteousness from the individual or the social standpoint. There can be no doubt how the present struggle will end. The social gospel will triumph; and the Bible, as explained by scientific scholarship, will stand at the center of the greatest movement for justice and freedom that the world has ever seen.