

The Cloister or the Town

By FRANCIS NEILSON

I

A LEARNED MAN asked me how many treaties of peace had been made and broken since Hamlet's father "in an angry parle, . . . smote the sledded Polacks on the ice." Somehow treaties of peace have come to mean little or nothing, and those who put their faith in the meetings of the Great Three or the United Nations do not realize that, so long as the present scheme of power politics prevails, treaties will not save them from war. The system must be completely changed if man is to have respite from bloodshed and rapine.

Yet, great efforts were made in the past to restore tranquility after the ravages of war. I advised my learned friend (not because I thought it was a practical suggestion, but solely for the sake of spiritual exercise) to look back to the tenth century and read once more what was done by simple religious men in the direction of keeping the peace. There are many works which deal with that period. Indeed, the essays in *The Cambridge Medieval History* provide an excellent foundation for any student who will turn his mind to this grave question, for in it he will find not only what some of Europe's greatest scholars of today have said, but also a bibliography that is of invaluable worth. Such a task, however, is one for an old-fashioned student—one who will take a wide survey of time and events. It will not be of much interest to the man who devotes himself to a mere segment of a country's story or the analysis of a batch of documents which concern only a short period in a dynasty. Therefore, it may be well to turn to the works that have been compiled by scholars of established competence, who have devoted

themselves to the task of presenting to us pictures of long-forgotten eras that should now command our interest and yield to us examples of what was done to restore order after the orgies of war.

Such a work is that by Dr. Joan Evans, "Monastic Life at Cluny, 910-1157."¹ I wish to turn the attention of the reader to this exceptionally fine review of the period because Miss Evans brings to light two great efforts made by simple abbots to establish peace in Europe.

The time may be approaching when a renewed interest will be aroused in the miracles of religious, economic, and political administration wrought by humble men who asked no material benefit for themselves. Moreover, if one can accept present indications, there may be even larger bodies of thinking men and women who desire to free themselves from the superficial writers who, since the days of the eighteenth-century Rationalists, have condemned root and branch anything connected with monastic life. The trends show that there is somewhere, in some souls, the yearning for a complete change in thought and action. Those who desire that change will find a study of Miss Evans' history of Cluny most helpful in informing them about what was done long years ago when the future of Europe looked quite as black as the future of the political world looks to us today.

II

THE MONASTERY OF CLUNY rose to greatness under the rule of four simple monks: Odo, the friend of kings and popes and one of the great churchmen of France; his successor, Aymar, who carried on Odo's work; and Maiol, who took the abbot's throne when Aymar became blind. Then came Odilo, who had acted as coadjutor for Maiol. These four men established in the Cluniac Order customs that affected the greater part of

¹ Published by Oxford University Press, London, Humphrey Milford, 1931.

Europe for hundreds of years. It is indeed a lesson in the economics of land tenure to read the story of the development of the territories of Cluny. And all this wonderful establishment, its purposes and influences were projected by men who sought nothing but the good of those around them. More was done to mediate and arbitrate in the feudal strife, under the guidance of these monks, than was accomplished by the kings and their ministers in all the succeeding centuries.

From Cluny came two institutions to which we might turn our minds now when all the world is war weary and the anguished peoples seek relief. About the end of the tenth century a solemn agreement was sworn to by the bishops and "a great concourse of barons and lesser folk" at a synod held at Sauxillange. It was called the *Pax Dei*. In its provisions we read:

Since we know that without peace no man may see God, we adjure you, in the name of the Lord, to be men of peace, that henceforward in these bishoprics and in these counties no man may break into a church, nor bear off the horses, foals, oxen, cows, asses, sheep, goats or pigs of the labourer and the serf, or the burden he bears upon his shoulders; that no man may kill any of these beasts; that he may exact nothing except from his own servants and his immediate dependants; that to build or to assault a fortress he may only take the men of his own land, his allod, *bénéfice* or *commende*; that clerks may not bear arms borne by laymen; that no man may even insult a monk, or those who walk with him, if they are unarmed; that no man may dare to invade the lands of churches, cathedrals, chapters, or monasteries, or to waylay their agents and despoil them. May every thief and evildoer who infringes this or refuses to observe it, be excommunicate, anathema, and driven from the threshold of the church, until he make amends; and if he refuse, let the priest refuse to sing mass for him, or to celebrate any sacrament; and at his death let him be deprived of Christian burial.²

Out of the *Pax Dei* came the *Truga Dei*, and this was proclaimed in all the dioceses of France. A part of its provisions states:

² Joan Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-2.

From the hour of vespers on Wednesday until sunrise on Monday let there reign a settled peace and an enduring truce between all Christians, friends and enemies, neighbours and strangers, so that for these four days and five nights at all hours there may be safety for all men, so that they can devote themselves to business without fear of attack. Let those who, having pledged themselves to the truce, break it, be excommunicated, accursed, and abominated, now and forever, unless they repent and make amends. Whosoever shall kill a man on a day of truce, shall be banished and driven out of his country, and shall make his way into exile at Jerusalem. . . .³

How strange it is that such wonders could be performed in the age that was called Dark and that we, in the days of enlightenment and progress have been embroiled, within a generation, in two wars such as were never before equalled for ferocity, hate, and destruction! How strange that three or four simple monks should have the spiritual power to bring kings and emperors to the foot of the altar, there to swear to keep the Peace of God and the Truce of God! I hazard a guess that these things could only be done by men who wanted nothing for themselves, men who, aloof from the world, were free to meditate and commune with themselves. These great efforts came from the cloister, not from the towns.

And, yet, the multifarious duties of administration imposed upon the abbot of a monastery such as Cluny exacted labor for which our present-day official politicians and great business men would not be able to find time. The secret of the spiritual strength and administrative zeal of the monks is to be found in the Cluniac rule of life. There were hours when silence was essential, and in that time the monk communed with his God and devoted himself to what he believed to be the purpose of the divine will.

III

ALAS, THE WORLD is not now ordered for communion. A system has grown up in which it is almost impossible for a

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

man to withdraw from the turmoil of the day. There is no quiet cell for those who are supposed to administer the affairs of the State. They are harassed from morning till night by a thousand and one conflicting claims. Their petitioners ask for quick decisions; reflection is almost out of the question for these men. There is no cloister where their thoughts might mature in actions of positive worth. The only places in all the world now left for meditation lie apart from the busy centers of life—the colleges, which themselves are threatened today with a system of short-cuts to knowledge that soon become footworn, and of ready-made vestments of learning that soon become threadbare.

Toward the close of the first World War I became impressed with the fact that we had entered upon the last megalopolitan stage. It is easy for me to understand now why I thought so. For two years I had traveled north, south, east, and west, lecturing to people who were too busy prosecuting the war to pay much attention to anything I had to say to them. My journeys took me to huge cities and to oases where there were colleges and universities planted among trees. The contrast was so startling—both as to location and the attitude of mind of my audiences—that I realized that city people were harassed and distracted and that only the professors and students of the institutions of learning paid some heed. To alternate, week after week, between a roaring city and the quiet campus of a college confirmed ideas I had long held that the town was doomed so far as thought and reflection were concerned and that the only hope for meditation was to be found in the tranquility of a college quadrangle.

IV

THE GREAT CITY is a manifestation of the loss of spiritual hope. It is the cruelest form of civilized slavery. It emphasizes every day the appalling chasm between the hundreds

of well-to-do people and the impoverished millions. The ancient curse is understood by few, and even well-read members of the religious sects do not know that the first murderer was the first builder of a city. We read in Genesis, chapter 4, verses 16 and 17:

And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.

The archaeologist is the only one among the scientists who is conscious, as he works, of the evanescence of those who build cities. When we think of his discoveries, we are amazed at the recordings of civilizations which have grown up in their might and, having reached a degree of magnitude, crumbled away and are covered by sand. The evidence of the futility of city-building is increasing year by year. During the past half century—or, say, since the days of Schliemann—volume after volume has been given to us which, when carefully read, is in the nature of a warning of what may happen to this civilization of which so many are proud.

The age of enlightenment, which is supposed to have accompanied the atheistic humanism that followed the Reformation, knew little or nothing of the science of archaeology as it is understood today. During the Tudor dynasty in England there were few who saw what the consequences of enclosure by force meant to the peasantry. The people who were uprooted from the land went, in their droves, to the labor markets, and there they raised slums in which to live and breed. In every land where there had been war against the free peasantry, the towns suffered too. The history of this convulsion is now extant. Those who wish to learn how the cities of our day came to be may turn to the works of the authorities who describe how, under a system of wage

slavery, the cities were built. As civilization advanced the great towns became monuments to suffering raised by landless men.

Few, indeed, were they who, knowing something of archaeology, raised a warning voice against the crime of denuding the countryside of the free laborer. What was called the "municipal spirit" became the dominant factor in the existence of city men. As they boasted of the increase in population and the wonderful facilities for manufacture, of the mileage of railroad networks and the advantages of their light and power systems, of their art galleries, libraries, churches, and schools, slums were springing up behind the bulwarks of their proud edifices. The real meaning of the city cannot be expressed in terms which indicate its growth and municipal advantages because these are enjoyed regularly by perhaps only a quarter of the population. To understand what the city really means to posterity, one must look into the conditions of life which affect the vast majority of its inhabitants. There is not one urban area of any importance in this land—or in any other land for that matter—which will bear close examination.

The economic life of the city worker is a perpetual struggle against hunger. The housing conditions under which he must exist shock the sensibilities of those who are capable of understanding the menace they are to the health of the community. When so-called "respectable" neighborhoods deteriorate and the well-to-do residents move to other parts of the town, these areas soon become slums, and whereas a house was formerly occupied by one family, it becomes a tenement into which four or five families are crowded.

All this is known to those who have studied the question. During the past two generations civic movements have sprung up to deal with the problem. But they have failed to make the slightest impression upon it. For poverty in-

creases rapidly under the system of the taxation of wealth, and the birth-rate of the submerged people also tends to increase. Therefore, the valiant efforts of the slum-reformers have not kept pace with the growth of the evil conditions that call for amelioration.

Dr. Barnes, the Bishop of Birmingham, told an English co-operative conference:⁴

Whereas sometimes good racial stock finds the struggle against bad conditions too severe, bad stock can endure sordid, unhealthy surroundings and breed recklessly to maintain its numbers in miserable poverty.

Though we know mental defects are inherited, civilized man protects the weak and even worthless, so our mental deficient and problem families increase.

However, not all the vicious elements of city life spring from the impoverished victims of the system. Indeed, the local politicians of all the great towns organize these heterogeneous masses with a view to their voting strength. On the one hand, the masses are pampered and, on the other, they are electorally disciplined to vote for one set of exploiters or another. The two or three party machines are at work for months before an election counting heads and marshalling battalions of voters on make-work jobs. Then when the voting is done, the workers hear no more about reform until a few months before the next election. The well-to-do know how the election pendulum is made to swing, but few do more than complain.

What, then, can be expected of mass-man when a crisis arises, such as that which faced us in 1939? Everything that can be employed by the interested powers is used against him. The press, the pulpit, and the broadcaster enchain his mind from morning till night. The movie and the advertisements make him the victim of a reign of mendacity. No one presents the truth to him. Indeed, so quickly is his mind in-

⁴ Held at Nottingham, in May, 1945.

fluenced by the inimical powers that, in all probability, he would stone the foolish person who would attempt to enlighten him.

Man is no longer himself. He has surrendered to those who employ him for their own purposes. He is now mere putty in the hands of all those elements which desire to use him for the slaughter of war. For international strife yields wealth and power to the makers of it. The slum breeds mass-man, and he is the essence of war. It has been demonstrated that the worse his condition becomes, the easier it is for the politicians to set the proletarians of the various nations at each other's throats. As poverty increases, wars widen their scope and are waged with greater ferocity and havoc.

V

NO MATTER WHERE ONE GOES in the villages of the land, he seldom finds slum-poverty raising its ugly head. Most of the people have enough, and with all their petty differences, they seem to get along fairly well. It is only the few who are improvident, and even in such cases, the victims seldom fall upon the charity of strangers. Somewhere they have relatives, who turn to and help them. I have in mind several villages where I have found none but the aged in an impoverished condition. And in not one case have I heard of destitution.

Here is the contrast. The *raison d'être* of a village is to provide a civic center and a market for the farms around it. Moreover, it is a social center where there are churches, a library, and a movie house. Here are the county offices and the court house, which seldom has much to do. It is worth the while of any townsman to go into one of these villages on a Saturday evening to see the farmers gather with their wives and children, bringing with them small produce and, after an evening's recreation, returning to their farms with

the commodities required for the household. Rarely is there a scene of disorder. All goes smoothly, and no one feels cheated or ignored. This is political democracy at its best, and it exists in thousands of villages in our country.

Although the merits and virtues of the villages are transparent, the cloven hoof of the Satan of State politics has left its mark even in the small places. The same operations of the city ward heelers are employed in the villages, but usually the people seem oblivious to the perils that menace them in this respect. Herein lies the danger that our republican institutions in the country will fall victim to the same elements that have made the politics of our towns a by-word.

Is there hope of a change? I am afraid not. So long as the slum-bred man submits to the political slavery of the party machines, it is futile to think of reform. How is it possible to go to these people and ask them to reflect upon their condition and understand how it was brought about? If they do not know this elementary matter, how are they to be expected to demand a change for the better?

Every economic, political, and social reform of the nineteenth century came about because there were men who went directly to the people and told them the grave nature of their condition and why they suffered. When there was little or no school education for the great masses of people, it was possible to make them understand economic and political problems. Now that education is on the tongue of everybody and anybody, it is difficult to find a handful of people who will give the time to listen to a mentor who would strive to enlighten them. Is it that they love their misery and that all they ask for is bread? Was Dostoevsky right when he wrote his chapter on "The Grand Inquisitor" in "The Brothers Karamazov"?⁵ Is Ortega y Gasset right when he shows, in

⁵ Two vols., London, J. M. Dent & Sons; New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., Everyman's Library, 1939, Vol. I, Bk. V, Ch. V, pp. 252-71.

"The Revolt of the Masses,"⁶ the dreadful menace of mass-man?

VI

RECENTLY THERE HAVE BEEN several books published on the mystics. This is not to mention the work of Rufus Jones, Evelyn Underhill, and those other scholars who have presented us with their priceless lives of the mystics, such as Dr. Burch's "The Steps of Humility, by Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux"⁷ and Dr. Raymond Blakney's "Meister Eckhart."⁸ Two more books have come to my notice: "The Perennial Philosophy"⁹ by Aldous Huxley, and "Men Who Have Walked With God"¹⁰ by Sheldon Cheney. Does this mean that there is a demand for works upon the mystics? If there be one, I have no means of estimating what it amounts to. Yet, I cannot help but feel that there is a something stirring—yes, all over the world—that may be of great significance; a groping, a searching for some direction that will take us out of this brutalizing mess.

No one has described this condition we have reached in stronger terms than Frederick Soddy, in an article in the British magazine, *Cavalcade*, for August 18, 1945. He says:

During the last World War, the writer frequently expressed the fervent hope that this discovery [the atomic bomb] would not be made before the nations had learned to use and honour science for its creative rather than destructive power.

Indeed, that holocaust compelled him as a scientific man to make a critical examination of what passes for "economics," in order to discover why beneficent inventions and discoveries produced nothing but misery, frustration, and war.

The melancholy conclusion was that these things do not come about naturally, and that those responsible for government fear and hate science

⁶ New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1932.

⁷ Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1942.

⁸ New York and London, Harper & Brothers, 1941.

⁹ New York and London, Harper & Brothers, 1945.

¹⁰ New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

because, by its capacity to render people economically free, it requires better men than they are to govern at all.

And his concluding words are:

. . . It was realised that unless scientific men were ready and prepared to substitute for it [financial and political government] another, in accordance with the actual realities of the modern world, then scientific men had far better never have been born.

I am informed by the head of a body of scientists engaged in the preparatory work which culminated in the atomic bomb that already they realize that, if the bomb is to be used in warfare, the city of the future will have to be one long street, like some of the old villages of England and the small mining towns there. Science has proved that the city is vulnerable. This is all to the good, for anything that will drive men back to the primary industry will help solve the problem of poverty. But this will mean deep study. If anything is to be gained by it, men must understand fundamental economics.

To this end, some years ago, I wrote a novel called "The Garden of Doctor Persuasion."¹¹ In it I attempted to give a glimpse of the practical mystic at work. I would that those who have written such excellent expositions of the mystic life would now explain to the masses of men that mystics are human beings and have to work for their living. Perhaps the time is ripe for a whole series of novels on this great subject, which would present a community of mystics at work in an agricultural area, and contrast their labors with those of mass-man in the towns. If it be security of person, family, and produce that the majority of us seek, then how else can we find it than in a return to the source of the Creator's bounty?

Is the day past when man gave spiritual heed to the warnings of the wise? For centuries in this civilization men

¹¹ Appleton, Wis., C. C. Nelson Publishing Company, 1942.

heeded them and, indeed, planned their lives with the admonitions of the sages in their minds. How could it be otherwise when the cathedral was the "Bible of the poor"? It was their refuge and their strength; into it, day after day, they took their griefs and joys, and found solace for their misgivings and their errors. All that is changed, and now the cathedral has become one of the sights to be seen. But how seldom do the curious who visit these edifices realize that this change which has taken place in the attitude of the people and the church itself is in the nature of a warning that we have entered the last stage!

Spengler, in a passage of extraordinary beauty in "The Decline of the West," compresses the thought of some of the wisest mentors of the last century. He says:

With the former State, high history also lays itself down weary to sleep. Man becomes a plant again, adhering to the soil, dumb and enduring. The timeless village and the "eternal" peasant reappear, begetting children and burying seed in Mother Earth—a busy, not inadequate swarm, over which the tempest of soldier-emperors passingly blows. In the midst of the land lie the old world-cities, empty receptacles of an extinguished soul, in which a historyless mankind slowly nests itself. Men live from hand to mouth, with petty thrifts and petty fortunes, and endure. Masses are trampled on in the conflicts of the conquerors who contend for the power and the spoil of this world, but the survivors fill up the gaps with a primitive fertility and suffer on. And while in high places there is eternal alternance of victory and defeat, those in the depths pray, pray with that mighty piety of the Second Religiousness that has overcome all doubts for ever. There, in the souls, world-peace, the peace of God, the bliss of grey-haired monks and hermits, is become actual—and there alone. It has awakened that depth in the endurance of suffering which the historical man in the thousand years of his development has never known. Only with the end of grand History does holy, still Being reappear. It is a drama noble in its aimlessness, noble and aimless as the course of the stars, the rotation of the earth, and alternance of land and sea, of ice and virgin forest upon its face. We may marvel at it or we may lament it—but it is there.¹²

¹² Two vols., trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1926, Vol. II, p. 435.

Has not this been the case with all the civilizations that crumbled to dust, and what reason is put forth that we can escape an end similar to that which overtook the ancient ones? Our science will not save us. Indeed, it is hastening the day when men will realize that this system is tottering to its fall. And when that day comes, there will be a searching of heart and soul, and perhaps the Second Religiousness will appear as the only refuge that is left for man.

No one has traced this with greater knowledge and elaboration than Spengler himself. Indeed, it may be said that he stands alone as the one who has divined the aftermath of a disappearing civilization:

... [The phenomenon of] the Second Religiousness consists in a deep piety that fills the waking-consciousness—the piety that impressed Herodotus in the (Late) Egyptians and impresses West-Europeans in China, India, and Islam—and that of Caesarism consists in its unchained might of colossal facts. But neither in the creations of this piety nor in the form of the Roman Imperium is there anything primary and spontaneous. Nothing is built up, no idea unfolds itself—it is only as if a mist cleared off the land and revealed the old forms, uncertainly at first, but presently with increasing distinctness. The material of the Second Religiousness is simply that of the first, genuine, young religiousness—only otherwise experienced and expressed. It starts with Rationalism's fading out in helplessness, then the forms of the Springtime become visible, and finally the whole world of the primitive religion, which had receded before the grand forms of the early faith, returns to the foreground, powerful, in the guise of the popular syncretism that is to be found in every Culture at this phase.¹³

What, then, is the choice? Now that everything is to be speeded up, surely it becomes more and more necessary that we should meditate, reflect deeply upon the only two alternatives that are offered to us. The first is war and more war; the other is peace. But peace under the present system is impossible. Indeed, there is nothing left to be tried that will move us any nearer the goal of no more war. And the day of

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 310-11.

the Second Religiousness may be beyond our ken, although some of the empires of the past toppled quickly to the dust. Meanwhile, the only hope I can think of lies in a drift from the towns back to Mother Nature where man belongs. This exodus from bricks and mortar should begin before the weapons of science render the denizen of the city incapable of escaping his fate. Perhaps—who knows?—some simple men may come again, such as were the first monks of Cluny, and call for a Peace of God and a Truce of God. They may lead us back to the conditions of life that prevailed in the greatest of the centuries by founding communities that will live in harmony and be satisfied with the simple abundance the earth provides. There, in the quiet of the open, man will have a chance to meditate, and reflection may help him to retrieve his own soul.

The wisdom of the ages is still good:

LET US HEAR THE CONCLUSION OF THE WHOLE MATTER: FEAR GOD,
AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS: FOR THIS IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN.¹⁴

¹⁴ Eccles., 12: 13.

New York.