

JUSTICE *VERSUS* DOGMA

We have now surveyed the first big chapter in the evolution of the *church*. Out of the terrible struggle with heathenism the One God emerged victorious over his pagan rivals. So long as there were many gods claiming allegiance there was no chance to focus the minds of the people on one principle. The rise of monotheism was, therefore, a decided gain, because it concentrated public opinion along the same channels of thought. But as soon as monotheism was established, a new struggle arose over the question, How is the One God to be served?

When the exiled Judeans were at length permitted by their foreign rulers to return, Jerusalem was rebuilt and Hebrew nationality was re-established under the form of "Judaism." The name "Jew" is derived by contraction from Judah, the southern district, or tribe, of the Hebrews. Jewish history begins after the Babylonian captivity; and it revolves around the religion of the One God. The Jews, alone among the nations of antiquity, bore witness to a single Divine Principle worthy of recognition by man. Alone amid the darkness of heathenism, the rem-

nant of the Hebrews became a light to the Gentiles, that they might be for salvation to the end of the earth (Isa. 49:6).

Monotheism has, indeed, spread from the "Holy Land" all over the world—not figuratively, but literally. Instruction has gone forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. The Hebrew Scriptures are held sacred by an ever-increasing host numbered in the hundreds of millions. Yet, wherever monotheism has gone, there has been a struggle over the question *how* the One God should be worshiped. From Judaism have come both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism; and within these denominations the old Hebrew struggle for justice has repeated itself under a new form.

Two classes have appeared in all churches alike. On the one hand, there have been the dogmatists—those who have wanted to persuade or compel people to hold a certain "correct," or "orthodox," belief and ritual. In order that the world shall be saved, everybody must believe the right way and observe the right forms of worship. This is the primary and fundamental thing in religion, according to the dogmatists. But on the other hand, there have been the moralists—those who have insisted that God's fundamental demand is for justice and righteousness. Dogmatism has

always tended to be allied with wealth, and has generally frowned upon "agitation"; while moralism has always tended to raise the question of rich and poor.

Under Judaism, for instance, the priests and rabbis have been as earnestly devoted to the worship of One God as were the great Hebrew prophets before the Babylonian captivity. But at the same time orthodox Judaism has tended strongly to identify religion with correct theological beliefs and ritual observances. The danger that lay before Judaism—and to which it largely succumbed—was the temptation to oppose the worship of "other gods" without fighting the injustice with which other gods were identified by the Hebrew prophets. In Judaism (as in Romanism and Protestantism) there has always been a tendency to associate the clerical order in various ways with the wealthy.

It is not at all difficult to see the place of Jesus in this evolution. As a plain matter of history, the priesthood and the wealthy were against him, while the common people were for him. He pointed out that the Pharisees and scribes were active religious workers, took front seats in church, made long prayers, and tithed mint, anise, and cummin, but that they left undone the "weightier

matters of the law." And what were these weightier, more important, matters? Chief among them was *justice* (Matt. 23:23; Mark 12:32-40; Luke 11:42).

Toward the upper classes, Jesus took the tone of the Hebrew prophets. In the same way that the prophets declaimed against the rich for adding house to house and field to field, so Jesus emphasized the land problem when he denounced the wealthy for devouring widows' houses. The scribes and Pharisees, he said, cleansed the outside of the cup; but within, it was full of extortion. A rich man would find it as difficult to get into the Kingdom of God as a camel to squeeze through a place too narrow for him. The gospels give clear evidence that the religious movement centering around the person of Jesus got its early driving power through the economic protest of poverty against wealth.

That Jesus continued the work of such leaders as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah is shown, not only by his frequent quotations from them, but in the popular recognition of him as one of the Hebrew prophets risen from the dead (Mark 8:28; Luke 9:19). In his denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees he charges them with being the "sons," or successors, of those that slew the prophets (Matt. 23:31). The chief priests and leading

citizens were slow in destroying him for fear of the people (Luke 19:47, 48; 20:19).

It is by one of the ironies of history that the Jewish race has been blamed for the murder of Jesus. He was killed, not by the Jews as a people, but by the *privileged* classes, acting in concert with the Roman conquerors of Judah. Himself a Jew, he had more friends than enemies among his own people; his disciples were of his own race; the common people, who heard him gladly, were of his own stock; and the apostle Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5).

No specific program of economic, political, and social reform can be found in the New Testament. Modern radicals who seek to buttress their programs by an appeal to the Gospels really weaken their case. The New Testament continues the struggle for justice, which began far back in Hebrew times. This biblical movement, in all its aspects, raises the social problem without finding a definite, concrete *solution* for the problem. It is for us to discover, within the terms of Jesus' doctrine of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, the proper method of handling the question of justice. But it is a mistake to seek the enlistment of church or Bible in behalf of any particular scheme of reform.

SOCIAL PROBLEM OBSCURED

While the early appeal of the Christian movement was to the lower classes, a change began to come over the new religion the farther it spread in the world. The apostle Paul defended chattel slavery, and advised slaves who had embraced Christianity to be submissive to their masters and content with their lot. But as the process of church organization went forward in Greek and Roman territory, the ecclesiastical offices and machinery fell more and more into the hands of the wealthy. The Epistle of James warns the church against giving place and power to the wealthy man who comes into their assembly wearing a gold ring and fine clothing. "Do not the rich oppress you, and themselves drag you before the judgment seats?" (Jas. 2:1-6).

The suppression of democratic life and the spread of aristocratic influence in the early church explain the rise and luxuriant growth of dogma. The great theological controversies did not begin while ecclesiastical affairs were controlled by the plain people. Not until the church had come under the sway of wealth did it develop a keen interest in dogma. Then came the age of the "church councils." These meetings, or conventions, did not spring from the masses. They were engineered by emperors, bishops, and priests

who were in league with the upper classes. One of the most famous ecclesiastical agents of aristocracy was that prince of orthodox theologians, Augustine, whose life overlapped the fourth and fifth centuries after Christ. Augustine's work did more than that of any ancient churchman to establish the reign of dogma, obscure the social problem, and bury the struggle for justice.

It is not for us here to investigate the question whether the rise of dogma was necessary to the order and progress of the world. That is a matter by itself. What we are emphasizing in this connection is a fact about which there can be no dispute, namely, that in Greek and Roman Catholicism, as in Judaism, the problem of justice was thrust into the background by the ascendancy of wealth in the church. The priesthood allied itself with the rich, and spent much of its time in theological discussions, arguments, and controversies which turned the attention of the people away from the great themes that were put in the foreground by Jesus and the Hebrew prophets.

Augustine, the dogmatist of Christianity, was partly contemporaneous with Chrysostom, the last eminent preacher of justice in the ancient world. Chrysostom was appointed bishop of Constantinople by the emperor Arcadius, and he proved to be a most extraordinary and unusual

churchman. Preaching after the manner of the Hebrew prophets, he dwelt upon the enormous accumulations of property in the hands of the upper classes, and pointed out how land monopoly closed the doors of industrial opportunity in the face of the plain people. Deposed from his office and driven from the city, he died in exile.

Dogma was triumphant all through the so-called Middle Ages, during the long period in which the barbarian tribes of Europe were slowly evolving into the nations of modern history. During this time, the leading priests and bishops were associated closely with the nobility in the various European countries; and the bishops themselves became, in fact, great landlords, holding vast estates, more or less tax-free, in the name of the church. The hard old Roman law of private land monopoly was carried from Italy over Europe as an aid to the upper classes in controlling the people; and in this legal process the Roman ecclesiastics were on the side of the aristocracy.

The beginnings of the Protestant Reformation can be discerned in statutes passed by the English Parliament against the accumulation of tax-free land by the church. Blackstone, in his famous *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, considers the subject in some detail (Book II, chap. xviii).

The controversy around the land question brought into prominence an English Roman Catholic priest by the name of John Wicliffe, who has been called the "Morning Star of the Reformation." As Macaulay Trevelyan points out, Wicliffe's agitation of the land question came *before* his break with the orthodox Roman theology. His economic liberalism preceded and led the way to his theological heresy. Bearing this in mind, it is worth while to read a passage from his writings:

Secular lordships, which clergymen have full falsely, against God's law, and spend them so wickedly, should be given wisely by the king and wise lords to poor gentlemen, who would justly govern the people, and maintain the land against enemies; and then might our land be stronger by many thousand men of arms than it is now, without any new cost of lords, or taxation of the poor commons, and be discharged of great heavy rent, and wicked customs brought up by covetous clergy, and of many taxes and extortions, by which they be now cruelly pillaged and robbed.¹

The Reformation in Germany was closely connected with uprisings of the peasants against the oppressions of landlordism. Public lands, formerly belonging to all, were seized by the nobility. The Romanized law courts, controlled by the aristocracy, dealt out injustice to the poor. The grievances of the people were stated in many

¹ *Select English Works of Wiclif*, Oxford, 1869-71, III, 216, 217.

political and economic platforms, the most famous of which were the "Twelve Articles." This document was publicly approved by Martin Luther, who said that if the land brought forth as many coins as ears of corn, the profit would not go to the farmer who labored on the land, but to the landlord who lived off the farmer.

On its economic side, the Reformation confiscated the estates of the Roman Catholic church. These lands, however, were not given to the people but to the Protestant aristocracy. As the historian Motley observes, "The religious reformation in every land of Europe derived a portion of its strength from the opportunity it afforded to potentates and great nobles for helping themselves to church property." As a rule, the landed magnates were the organizers of the early Reformation churches; and from what we have already learned about the influence of wealth in Judaism and Romanism, we can understand why it is that Protestantism, during most of its history, has been preoccupied with dogma rather than with justice and the social problem.

Orthodox Reformation theology is an aristocratic product. The leading Protestant writers on religious doctrine were either men of independent economic position, or were financed by the well-to-do. At the time when their systems

were produced, there was no science of history; and hence there was no possibility that Protestant theologians could receive the Bible as it is now understood by historical and sociological scholars. This consideration applies, not only to the doctrinal teachers of Protestantism, but to the middlemen of the church—the preachers and evangelists who sat at the feet of doctrinal professors and carried the gospel to the multitude.

Probably the nineteenth century will be recognized as the epoch in which the struggle between dogma and morality reached an issue. The external conditions of religious life underwent a profound modification during that period. While previous changes in religion had gone forward under the *union* of church and state, the victorious party in theological conflicts using public authority to back its claims, the *separation* of church and state now took away the powerful support of government from theological doctrines, and at once placed the evolution of religion within the sphere of private, and relatively peaceful, discussion and research.

The nineteenth century challenged, in a final and conclusive way, the authority of the clerical class, which hitherto, among Jews, Roman Catholics, and Protestants, had enjoyed a monopoly of doctrinal teaching, and had consequently occupied

a mediatorial position between God and the people. Theological controversies that had once blazed afar now died away; and the life of the churches began to gravitate insensibly around the principle of morality as the fundamental consideration in religion.

Few realized what had happened. Many lamented the shifting of ancient landmarks and became so perplexed that all religion seemed lost. In reality, another significant era in spiritual experience was closed. Dogmatism had gone the way of the heathen deities; and the religion of the One God had at length come out upon the high ground of justice and righteousness.

But this is not the end of the story. For today, in the twentieth century, we are in the midst of another crisis. The air is filled with strange battle cries; novel issues are taking form; and we are living in a new chapter of religious evolution which grows naturally out of the developments of the past.