

CHAPTER IV.

THE AGGRESSIVE SOCIAL ACTION OF THE CHURCH.

THOSE who are observant of the movement of great social forces in directions which they anxiously scrutinise, who feel the pressure of great problems the solution of which they are unable to discover, are apt to take an exaggerated view of the burdens and difficulties of their time. Now, for the encouragement of faith, it is good to cast the eye backward over the centuries during which the Church of Christ has been fulfilling the vocation of her Lord and Head. "History," it has been said, "is the chart and compass of national endeavour."¹ The history of the Church is the chart and compass of Christian endeavour. It indicates the paths along which, under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth, it has travelled and is called to travel. It tells us of the rocks and

¹ Friends in Council, p. 227.

reefs to be avoided, of the forces which have interrupted, and still interrupt, its legitimate progress. It brings us into relation to those master spirits of the ages who, by their inspiration and service, shaped the best action of their day, and it opens up to us the secret of the strength by which they "subdued kingdoms and wrought righteousness." It proves to us that, though they may vary in form, the struggles we must face, the aims we must pursue, are, after all, the perennial struggles and aims of the higher life in Christ, in its conflict with the inferior purposes and ambitions of men. And thus, by all the testimony of the ages gone, we are encouraged to "take up the whole armour of God, that we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."¹

But, for two reasons, a retrospect of ecclesiastical history may repel rather than attract.

In the first place, the features most prominent in the retrospect are far from inviting. We might expect gardens of the Lord, watered everywhere, beautiful with flowers, fragrant with spices, and enriched with trees yielding all manner of fruit, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Instead of this, we are

¹ Eph. vi. 13.

introduced to a succession of wide tracts swept bare by storms of passion, of arid wastes of controversy, of scenes in which priestcraft is beheld borrowing the carnal weapons of the most despicable statecraft, and creating atmospheres of wile, intrigue, and oppression. This is true. But let us bring the eyes of Christian wisdom and love to our study. Neander has rightly observed that "our understanding of the history of Christianity will depend on the conception we have formed in our own minds of Christianity itself."¹ If we have formed the conception of a society the law of whose development is, that the authority on which it must depend is a moral authority, that the truth with which it is charged can be unfolded only through frictions, through the cleavages caused by the sword which Christ announced that He had come to send, that the divine treasure, moreover, is deposited in earthen vessels, in weak and imperfect men; then, we shall not only cease to wonder at the battles whose stains and traces are evident in every generation, but we shall feel that these battles are full of pathos and interest, we shall see in them the resistances of the darkness which is always seeking to overtake the light, and the often slow, but ulti-

¹ Church History, Introduction.

mately sure, assertion of principles which modify the permanent conditions of life. We shall be reminded, too, that the real history of the Christian society is not that which is prominent in records. Writing of England, Ruskin protests, "That which people call her history is not hers at all, but of her kings and the tax-gatherers employed by them."¹ In a similar strain, we can affirm that the story told in books is often not the story of the *real* Church, but that of emperors and popes, of factions and councils. The story is to be looked for elsewhere. "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation."² It comes and it is advanced, through spiritual and social activities which scarcely appear, through all that enters into the making of Christian soul and community; through transformations of character, individual and national, effected by the diffusion of those educative, disciplinary, and ameliorative influences which tone and determine the civilisation of the world.

In the next place, the vastness of the undertaking may indispose us to any attempt to review the bygone centuries. The utter impossibility of even summarising social expansions which spread over such lengthened periods is at once

¹ Fors Clavigera, vol. i. p. 48.

² St Luke xvii. 20.

recognised. And, in order that the supposed objection may be disarmed, the aim of this chapter shall be merely to illustrate, by rapid sketches, the unfolding of the Church's vocation, and its aggressive action on human society. Two epochs, for the sake of such illustration, are selected—the one, that which extends from the beginning of the organised Christian community to the peace of the Church, when Constantine yielded himself and his empire to the vision of the cross; and the other, that which, including the latter half of the middle ages, leads on to the Reformation of Western Christendom in the sixteenth century. These epochs are vast, but the survey, such as it is, will speak to us of the growth of that tiny seedling which, sown on the soil of Palestine, put out great branches, so that the birds of the heaven—the winged thoughts and aspirations of humanity—came and lodged under its shadow.

The day of Pentecost marks the beginning of the organised Christian brotherhood. On that day 3000 souls were added to the original band of disciples numbering 120, and the household of faith was formed. The converts, we are told, “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching

and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.”¹ In the glow of the love which knit all together, that which was individual to each member of the community was merged in the new corporate life. It required no ordinance to establish a scheme of reciprocal benefit and service. This was, almost unconsciously, the result of the union. No more beautiful picture of a community was ever drawn than that which is drawn in the simple words of the chronicler: “All that believed were together, and had all things common; and they sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, according as any man had need. And, day by day, continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they did take their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people.”² It was the sign of the heaven which lay around the infancy of the Church. A vision, alas! too soon to fade, yet one in which Christianity may recognise a truth, not to be reproduced in the letter, but in its spirit, to “perish never.”

Thus, in the feeling of its relation to the risen and exalted Christ, and by the guidance of the Spirit Whom he had promised, the Church developed a characteristic social collectivism.

¹ Acts ii. 42.

² Acts ii. 44-46.

Some of the first things recorded concerning the Church had a distinctly social aspect. The first sin against its holiness was that in which two of those who had been added to it lied to the Holy Ghost, in regard to the surrender of their property.¹ The first discordant note in its music was a "murmuring" of certain Hellenists, "because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations."² And the first action of the laity was the selection, in accordance with the counsel of the apostles, of "seven men of good report from among them, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,"³ whom the apostles might appoint to the ministry of "the tables." A type of society had been originated which, claiming to be divine in its source and authority, "the fulness of Him who filleth all in all,"—"a tower," as Hermas, the Bunyan of the early time, called it, "founded on the word of the almighty and glorious Name, and kept together by the invisible power of the Lord,"⁴—joined all its constituents in the most intimate of social unities, in practical sympathies, whose impelling motive was, "the grace of their Lord Jesus Christ, in that, though He was rich, yet for their sakes He became poor."⁵

¹ Acts v. 1-11.

² Acts vi. 1.

³ Acts vi. 2, 3.

⁴ The Pastor of Hermas, Vision ii. chap. 3.

⁵ 2 Cor. viii. 9.

“This second spring-tide of the world,” writes Dean Church, “this fresh start of mankind in the career of their eventful destiny, was the beginning of many things, but what I observe now is that it was the beginning of new chances, new impulses, and new guarantees for civilised life, in the truest and worthiest sense of the words.”¹ An organism which gave a “fresh start” in the world’s history could not but be largely influenced by its environment. In order that it might push its own vitality outwards, it needed to receive from the surrounding soil: it could be robust, adaptive, human whilst spiritual, only by correspondence with elements which were akin to it, and by opposition to features which were alien to it, in the times on which it acted. Now, the environment with which, more and more, it realised a contact was the widespread Roman Empire. Its gradual disengagement from the Judaism under whose shadow it moved in its earliest morn is traced in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. And the liberation, towards which much had led, was completed through the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans under Titus. The city where the Lord was crucified, and whence the faith in Him had gone forth on the mission for which He had destined it, became

¹ The Gifts of Civilisation.

a sacred memory, a holy place; but Christianity was thenceforth identified, not with Palestine, but with the world which acknowledged the sway of the imperial eagle.

The pioneer of its more catholic spirit and movement was the apostle Paul. To him, more than to any other of the apostles, was due the development of the Church in the first stadium of its course. The special theatre of his action was Asia Minor. He passed, at intervals, into Europe; but in this province the most striking imprints of his genius were made. He organised Christian communities in the larger centres of population. Each community, each church, had a certain local independence; but the feeling of relation to the larger unity was enforced in a practical manner. There were collections for poor saints in Jerusalem; he reckoned it a privilege to be the bearer of these collections. Deputations were, again and again, sent from church to church. The Epistles that St Paul addressed to one church, he asked should be forwarded to, and read in, other churches. The same social features—the brotherhood in Christ, the care of the weak, the poor, the widow, the orphan—were presented in every congregation. In his charge to the presbyters of Ephesus, there is an interesting reference to a saying of Jesus, not found in the Gospels,

which illustrates one of the main points of the apostle's teaching, "I gave you an example, how that so labouring ye ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."¹

Thus teaching, and diffusing a purer and loftier social spirit, St Paul made his memorable missionary circuits. The more the idea of the Church as a debtor for the Gospel of Christ to the whole world dominated his perception, the more did Rome and all the culture with which it was identified lay a spell on him. Greece, though subject to Rome, had, by means of its language and its literature, conquered Rome. And we see a noble blending of Greek thought with Roman imperialism in his conception of the social life of the Church, as that is presented in the First Epistle to the Corinthians.² Of this conception Dean Stanley has said: "It is not Asiatic but European. It was Greece, not India, which first presented the sight of a πόλις or State in which every citizen had his own political and social duties, and lived not for himself but for the State. It was a Roman fable, and not an Eastern parable, which gave to the world the image of a body politic, in

¹ Acts xx. 35.

² 1 Cor. xii.

which the welfare of each member depended on the welfare of the rest. And it is precisely this thought which, whether in conscious or unconscious imitation, was suggested by the sight of the manifold and various gifts of the Christian community. His picture is the Christianisation not of the Levitical Hierarchy but of the Republic of Plato."¹ We can so far homologate this statement, for there are approximations in the ideal of the Christian apostle to that of the Greek philosopher, whilst at the same time it is suggestive of the Roman genius for government; but the apostle strikes a note which was not borne to him from either the Ægean Sea or the Tiber,—the note sounded in his wonderful poem on love,² and prolonged in the expression of his aim, "to make human society one living body closely joined in communion with Christ." With this aim becoming always more distinct, the march led by him was towards, was into, that world, covering "an area three thousand miles in length from east to west, and two thousand in breadth from north to south," which owned the sway of Rome.

The mighty and the wise little thought that he and the humble men who had caught "from his

¹ St Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians, vol. i. pp. 270, 271.

² I Cor. xiii.

joyaunce a surprise of joy" were the bearers of a seed-basket, from whose contents, as they sowed "beside all waters," was to spring a new harvest for the earth. They little thought "of what was in store for civil and secular society as they beheld them plying their novel trade of preachers and missionaries."¹ At first they scarcely noticed the new teaching; if they noticed it at all, it seemed only a phase of Jewish fanaticism. But gradually, and not slowly, considering the obscurity in which it moved, it forced itself on notice. Its promulgation, and the hold it took on persons of all sorts and conditions, are among the problems of history.

It is a problem not now to be discussed. The causes, as from a merely human view-point, of the progress of Christianity in the early centuries, are related to climates of religious feeling or want of feeling, tendencies of thought, conditions of society, and other matters, whose consideration would take us too far afield. One point only may be noticed. Assuming that, beyond all secondary causes, *the* cause was the divine power which accompanied the Gospel, and appropriated the Church of Christ, there were facilities for the prosecution of the mission

¹ Gifts of Civilisation.

of the Gospel and the Church specially provided by the Empire and its circumstances. It was an all but universal Empire. It had realised a solidarity of government and of interests which favoured the conception of a universal Church, of a new solidarity of mankind. The time of its advance, moreover, was, as Professor Ramsay has indicated, a time of transition from the narrower conception of the Republic, according to which Rome was the mistress of subject nations, to the wider conception of the Empire, according to which nations were the constituents of a great confederation whose head was Rome.¹ And this wider view touched an answering chord in the Church: it nourished the presentiment of a spiritual-social vastness. Finally, the machinery of government; the universality of two languages, especially the Greek; the energies of commerce; the marches of armies and the voyages of fleets, making pathways by land and sea,—all contributed to the diffusion of Christian influence. In the words of Isaac Taylor, “The Gospel took to itself the wings of every energy which then carried men to and fro between the three continents. It used the roads and the ships of the Empire; it went in the track of caravans. It flowed, as one might say, through the arteries of

¹ The Church in the Roman Empire, p. 10.

the Greek language, philosophy, and literature; it went wherever books had gone before it; culture was a preparation of the soil for its reception. Forests and wilds it *did* penetrate by adventurous and precarious missions; but, along with the refinements of a high civilisation, it dwelt at home."¹

So it was that, when the second century was running its course, the Roman magistrate awoke to the discovery that another empire, in the world but not of it, was, with weapons he could not understand, challenging the might of the Cæsars.

Why was the Church singled out for persecution? The policy of Rome was tolerant. Why was its faith branded as a *superstitio prava* and condemned as a *religio illicita*? There is a well-known testimony as to the character and aims of the Christian society which takes back to the year A.D. 120. Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, sent a report to the Emperor Trajan, that not only bears an impartial witness to the growth of Christianity in his province, but also supplies a most interesting glimpse into the social life of the Christian community.² His is a testimony very different from that of the historian Tacitus, who represents Christians as only hateful for their crimes and deserving punishment of hitherto un-

¹ Restoration of Belief, p. 5.

² Letters to Trajan, 96, 97.

exampled severity. But why does the mild and sagacious Trajan—with the information of his proconsul Pliny before him, to the effect that all he could find, after investigation, was that Christians were wont to meet together and sing hymns of praise to Christ, and covenant to be chaste and honest—yet sanction the infliction of punishment on these unoffending people, when they were apprehended and would not recant?

The answer is that, with an instinct which was quite correct, Roman statesmen discerned in the spread of Christianity a menace to the existing structure of society. Other religions were content to move in their own orbit: they might nurse fanaticisms, but any outbreak which disturbed the peace could be repressed, and they had no particularly aggressive character. But the Christian religion was inevitably aggressive. It did not, indeed, interfere with political relations. It inculcated the payment of "tribute to whom tribute was due." It had no quarrel with the Empire; nevertheless, the Empire was bound to quarrel with it. It was not only that the crafts which depended on sacrificial rites and temple worship were imperilled; it was not only that the *ceremoniæ Romanæ*—which, though little of a living faith attached to them, struck their roots far down into national and social

life—were more and more neglected; it was not only that Christians stood aloof from the bloody shows and cruel sports which were necessary for the diversion of the public mind, more particularly of the masses, from degradations that were eating into the core of the body politic; the danger of dangers was that, in this growing belief, there was an ethical and moral standard which collided with the standards of Roman citizenship. The benevolent aspects of the Christian fraternity might have been passed over, as denoting a harmless enthusiasm; but the obligations of the faith in its Sacred Person which it professed were another matter. They imposed on its members an authority supreme over that of the Cæsar; they asserted the inviolable sacredness of conscience—not as measured by the conventions of the State, but as measured by the royal law of the Christ Who was worshipped. As between the State and this Christ, there was for Christians no choice. It was this moral sense that uplifted the individual man; and, in the uplifting of the individual man, the knell of the slavery which was regarded as essential to society was sounded. And thus, to those who looked on the Religion simply from the Roman standpoint, simply with reference to the interests of the State, and the

cohesion of society on the Roman basis, the toleration of it was impossible. As early as the year 64, Nero, the miserable buffoon who wore the purple of the Cæsars, varied the accusation of incendiarism by that of an *odium humani generis*.¹ He endeavoured to stir the popular feeling against Christians by representing them as hostile to civilised life. And between the civilised life, as then organised, and the Christian life, there was a necessary and a radical hostility. In the measure of the Church's expansion that hostility was declared.² It was precipitated and developed by persecution. A new religious symbol of imperial unity had been invented; that symbol was the worship of the emperor. When the Christian was commanded to do homage to the deified Cæsar he refused, and, on account of his refusal, he was thrown to the lions or burned at the stake. Emperors learned what others than they have been taught—even the Church itself in later and corrupt

¹ "To the Roman *genus humanum* meant not mankind in general, but the Roman world, men who lived according to Roman manners and laws—the rest were enemies and barbarians."—The Church in the Roman Empire, p. 236.

² The attitude of the humane Aurelius is the most distinct of testimonies to the exact nature of the case. His persecution of Christians was contrary to the inclination of his mind: it was directed entirely by the political motives of a Roman statesman.

times—that in the blood or in the ashes of martyrs there is seed.

But now let us overlook all the fierce fight of affliction through which the Church was called to pass. Let us place ourselves at the beginning of the fourth Christian century, at the year 317, when the Edict of Constantine proclaimed the age of persecution past, and the reign of peace between Church and State begun. What then was the position of the Church? and what had it done for human society?

It had covered the entire area of the Roman Empire and penetrated beyond it.¹ In every city it had congregations, in some it had even a majority of the citizens. From the cities it had spread into the adjacent country, planting churches everywhere. It had carried its message to Gaul, to Britain, to Spain, to the forests of Swabia and Germany. It had made Asia Minor largely its own. Egypt, proconsular Africa, Numidia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, had Christian communities. It had crossed the Euphrates. It had travelled to Parthia, Persia, Arabia, India, and as far as China. Its line had gone through the earth. Barbarians—the barbarous tribes on the frontier of the Empire—had been taught to

¹ The social influence of the Church is traced in the present writer's 'Expansion of the Christian Life,' pp. 31-66.

bow in the name of Jesus. Where man was, the Church had felt itself bound to be. It had taught slaves, but it had gained the free and high-born also.¹ Its philosophers and apologists were second to none for learning and force. It was a vast and world-wide power. The number of its professed adherents is not the criterion of its influence. Perhaps, not a twentieth, not more than a tenth certainly, of the population of the Empire was Christian, when Constantine saw and accepted the cross. But the proportion of Christians, whatever it was, represented the moral earnestness, the vital and progressive force, of the Empire. And the social life which surrounded it had in many respects been struck, as with a wedge driven near to its base.

In all parts of the world, substantially the same type of social life was reproduced. In respect of polity, there were the bishops or overseers, the officers of various kinds, the administrations and administrators of the brotherhood. In respect of aims, it might be an exaggeration to affirm that the idea of a community held bound in its solidarity for all its constituents, especially for the sick

¹ "The Christian religion spread at first among the educated more rapidly than among the uneducated, and nowhere had it a stronger hold (as Mommsen observes) than in the household and at the court of the Emperor."—*The Church in the Roman Empire*, p. 56.

and the poor, was a distinctively Christian idea; for anticipations of it are to be found in Greek writers, and the *alimentations* of the Roman Empire grew to be a burden too heavy for the imperial exchequer. But there were features that dissociated the Church from all such *alimentations*. The policy that promoted them had respect to the maintenance of order and the suppression of revolution. It meant the demoralisation of the people. In the Church there was found a unity inspired by an utterly different spirit and motive. It interpreted a covenant of sympathy. The sanctuaries of Christians had orphanages or institutions of healing attached to them. We read of provision for widows, and children bereft of parents, of hospices, of hospitals for lepers, of benevolences of many kinds, of practical philanthropies which moderated the excitements of controversy, and were, to all without, a sign of brotherly love. And, in our contemplation of the earlier Church, we must not overlook the ethical and spiritual ideal which it ever kept in view. If Christians were held bound to love one another, it was for the sake of Him who had given them His cross to bear and had called them to be holy even as He is holy.

This society, mirroring, amidst all its imper-

fections, a lofty ideal of purified humanity, reached many sides of the surrounding life. Even the heathenism which opposed it was influenced by it.¹ It tended to form atmospheres of thought and feeling in which the inhumaneness and ghastliness of some of the features of this heathenism were evidenced. A public opinion condemnatory of infanticide, of exposure of children, of the cruelties of many kinds with which the records of the centuries are filled, had been formed and was rapidly spreading. Bloody spectacles, gladiatorial exhibitions, the brutal sports offered to prince and slave, were discountenanced by the diffusion of a gentler type of manners. A higher value was being put on human life, and a new ethic was silently salting the earth.

¹ "One of the most interesting facts in the history of religion under the Empire is the influence which was exerted by the new religion on the old, and the progress of discovery is gathering a store of information on this point which will at some future time make a remarkable picture."—*The Church in the Roman Empire*, p. 144.