

CHAPTER XII.

MORAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF SOCIALISM.

THE criticism to which the previous chapter was devoted indicates the grounds on which assent is withheld from the economic positions of socialism. The judgment condemns these as unsound and impracticable, even though the mind is sympathetic with the endeavour to elevate the permanent conditions of the toiling masses, and though it recognises many elements of truth in the ideal of society and of the State. But from the Christian standpoint the outlook is wider than that of economics. The contention of some is, that the question at issue should not be complicated by a reference to moral and religious interests, that the purview of socialism does not extend beyond the range of politics, and that only as a social-political system should it be considered and tested. This contention will not hold. The political and the ethical cannot be put asunder. Any and every constitution of

society must affect the character of those whom it includes; it must influence the "conduct, which is three-fourths of life." To say of a social adjustment that it is non-moral, is to condemn it as anti-moral. Moreover, the claim of the socialist is that the polity which he proposes is his morality.¹ He professes to find in it all that enters into the content of justice, of righteousness, of the brotherhood of men, and all that is efficient in the way of motive. It is, therefore, strictly relevant to the matter in hand, as it is necessary to the determination of the attitude and duty of the Church, to consider the consequences of the persistent socialistic propagandism by which we are confronted, and the moral and religious bearing of the theories which this propagandism emphasises as the only solution of the problems of poverty and labour.

None can be conversant with the feeling which is reflected in papers, tracts, and treatises that are largely circulated, and none can mingle, with some freedom, among the working classes in our cities without observing, within the last twenty-five years, an increasing, a more openly expressed, spirit of discontent. Take up "a new age" journal, or

¹ "The polity of the socialist is his morality, and his reasoned morality may, in the old sense of the word, be termed his religion."
—The Ethic of Free Thought, p. 319.

listen to the conversation or the oratory of those whom such a journal represents. The reiteration is, of wrongs inflicted by capital and capitalists ; of injustices of taxation, rent, administration ; of rotten conditions to which are due the poverty, the exploitation of the many and the enrichment of the few ; of long labour-time and hard labour-lot ; of the heartlessness of the rich, the pride of the privileged, the worldliness of Churches and of clergy ; of the need of revolution to set things right and to enforce the demands of the labourer ; of the golden time that will come when the transformations, the expropriations, and the appropriations of socialism are realised. Sometimes the language is that of thoughtfulness and earnestness ; sometimes it is that which, without reflection, repeats catch-words learned at second-hand ; sometimes it is that of the frivolous, if not the corrupt, mind : but it passes to and fro, and produces stir, ferment, bitterness of feeling. It may be said that this is true of only a fraction of the labouring class, or of any class. Perhaps so ; but the fraction is neither inconsiderable nor uninfluential. It is larger than many suppose. It has always some facts by which to support its assertions. It possesses the faculty of diffusion which attaches to strong opinions strongly uttered.

A contributory cause, and a conspicuous element, of this disaffection may be noticed.

Socialism has an international propaganda. Its boast is that it is emancipated from the limitations of country, that its cause is the common cause of the proletariat everywhere. Through its clubs, its associations, and its publications; by means of the focussing of all shades of opinion in London—the aroma of Continental and American sentiment is communicated to the agitation in Great Britain. Now, though the extreme views advocated elsewhere have no vogue in this country, a certain influence is communicated through them. The anarchism which is in evidence in Germany has not many avowed supporters, but thought is coloured by the idea of anarchy, as interpreted by Proudhon in the sentences, “That the political function be reabsorbed in the industrial. Thus social order will ensue spontaneously out of the simple operation of transactions and exchanges. Every man might then be called autocrat of himself, which is the extreme reverse of monarchical absolutism.”¹ Michael Bakunin is not the leader of any company of British socialists. His proclamation of “war to the death against all existing society, so

¹ *Die Prix Federatif*, p. 29.

that the revolutionist must be prepared to die, to kill with his own hands all who obstruct the revolution,"¹ would be repudiated, except by a very few, whose reception of the fierce saying makes them the most dangerous of the dangerous class. But his "running amuck against all accepted principles in religion, in politics, in domestic and social life,"² is at least faintly shadowed in the tones of many. The American socialist, who would regulate, not merely the production and distribution of wealth, but even the consumption of goods,³ goes further than his brethren on this side of the Atlantic would allow, but, in some demands which are formulated as to the absorption of all private property in a common good, affinity is joined with him. Thus, though the crystallised view of extremists is disavowed, a virus is insinuated into the talk of societies and the representations of current literature, and the vat is kept in ferment.

But the discontent alluded to is largely fed by that passion for equality which, as De Tocqueville has remarked, is the passion of democracies. Equality of condition, equality of opportunity; none above and none below; all

¹ Quoted in 'Contemporary Socialism,' p. 275.

² Contemporary Socialism, p. 267.

³ Parsons of Chicago.

masters, no servants; none with a more favourable start or stadium than others—such is the vision by which the imagination is dazzled, and both enthusiastic and despondent spirits in this social era hail it. They hail what cannot be. “Nature,” says Renan, “is injustice itself,”¹ inasmuch as it teems with inequalities. It is a mere commonplace to say that the equality craved is an idle dream, so long as there are differences in capacity, in gifts, in aptitudes physical, mental, and moral. All that can be done is to secure that every one shall have the best possible opportunity, that there shall be no unnecessary clogs on energy, that there shall be “a more effective participation of the poor equally with the rich in the civilisation which the increased productive resources of society afford the means of enjoying.”² But when it is urged, as in the essays of socialists it is urged, that “the State ought to make use of its legitimate powers for the establishment of the equality of conditions among men according to their personal merit,”³ a task is imposed on the State which it is unable to fulfil. The standards—equality of condition and

¹ Quoted by M. de Laveleye in ‘Contemporary Review.’

² Professor Wagner, Art. “Finan-Politik und Staat sozialismus.”

³ M. de Laveleye in ‘Contemporary Review.’

personal merit—are inconsistent; even if they were harmonious, “it would be beyond the power of the State to realise them for want of an effective calculus of either.”¹ To inflame unreflective minds by holding up prospects which are mere chimeras, and inducing the feeling that they are defrauded of some rights because of a failure to apply the powers of the State on their behalf—that the *plus* which others have is the reason of their *minus*, and that this *plus* should be taken away—is to appeal to what is meanest in human nature, uselessly to embitter feeling, and to divert the attention from the possibilities of improvement which are within the reach of all who apply their best energy in making the most of the situations that open to them.

We speak of a “divine discontent”; and the hunger and thirst for righteousness, the refusal to allow that the soul has ever attained to the full truth of its life and the eager pressing onward and upward, may be so termed. A certain discontent is caused by the advance of civilisation, and is itself a cause of further advance. In the measure in which standards of wellbeing are heightened, wants multiply, new needs are created, new ambitions are developed; and to

¹ Contemporary Socialism, p. 385.

satisfy these, to realise "life more and fuller," is an incitement to progress. But there is a right and there is a wrong discontent: right, when the desire to be is superior to the mere desire to have, when the mind does not confuse the conditions of happiness with happiness, and understands that the secret of felicity is the better man rather than the better circumstance; when to be true to oneself and to gain the full advantage of all the good that lies in the actual position, is more than a mere craving to get some good that another has, or that lies out-with the sphere of the practicable. There is too little of this right sort; there is too much of the wrong—that which is closely akin to covetousness—in all circles and classes. But there are elements which give a peculiar asperity to the merely covetous instinct when it is sharpened by invectives against society in general, and especially against those who are represented as neither toiling nor spinning. By all means denounce the idle rich as well as the idle poor. By all means insist that the only privilege shall be that which consists with useful service, and that all, in consideration of what they receive through the corporate life of the nation, shall contribute by honest work to the commonwealth. But, to indulge in indis-

criminate diatribes against those whose share of the world's good is larger than that of some; to be for ever inveighing against existing constitutions, and stirring up strife and envy by dwelling on the rights of which capital and privilege defraud the labourer, to the exclusion of the duties that he owes to his world and his God, and of the call to help himself and utilise the sources and occasions of happiness that lie to his hand,—is simply to rob the life of its essential dignity and worth, and to corrupt noble aspiration into an ignoble and rankling covetousness. *Cui bono?* Does the nurture of this species of discontent tend to quicken the impulses of benevolence? Certainly not. Does it tend to strengthen domestic and family relations? The writer has known many who, under the spell of socialistic agitation, felt the simplicities of home-life irksome, became dissatisfied with all the surrounding, and ceased to interest themselves in causes which they had previously furthered. Does it give elevation to the character? It robs the character of a purifying idealism, hitherto one of the finest features in the working classes of our country, and narrows the vision of the life to a jealous observation of, and fruitless sighing after, unattainable conditions “of the earth, earthy.”

This is the manner, this is the result, of a discontent which spreads as socialism spreads, and which, though now kept in subordination by counteracting influences, has the potentiality of increasing from a disturbing element into the wild fury of a hurricane.

But further; in the consideration of a system which is presented as the realisation of the social ideal, one of the main interests to the mind, looking on it in the light of Christian truth, must be its relation to the moral law, to the principles and issues on which the moral life of the people is built. The subject thus suggested is so wide that special topics must only be glanced at. For example, family life. It would be unfair to identify socialism as a political scheme with the statements of its advocates. It is entirely compatible with, and is often held along with, strict views as to the foundation and the responsibilities of the home. But the tendencies of the thought of its expositors need to be watched. Thus, in an important work under the joint authorship of the late Mr Morris and Bax, it is said that, with the advent of social economic freedom, "no binding contract between parties as regards livelihood would be necessary, property in children would cease to exist, a new

development of the family would take place, on the basis not of a predetermined lifelong business arrangement, to be formally and nominally held to, irrespective of circumstances, but on mutual inclination and affection, terminable at the will of either party.”¹ There can be no doubt that this “new development” is contemplated by some, and these not the least influential, of the leaders of the “new society.” And, in their plans of education, such an assumption of responsibility and provision for children is indicated as would practically relieve parents of all but a mere fraction of their responsibility.²

But, without dwelling on particular points, it may be asked whether, in respect both of what it introduces into its moral features, and of what it omits, it must not be held to be wanting.

It is a protest against selfishness—the selfishness of capital. The charge that it levels against the political economy which it would supersede is that it ministers to selfishness in its view of wealth, in its theory of barter, in its aims and its canons. It condemns the existing order as founded on and supported by selfishness—that of competition, man against man. Its lash is specially reserved for the capitalist—the

¹ Socialism, p. 299.

² *E.g.*, Fabian Society Tract on Education.

selfish thief who has stolen the surplus value of the labourer. We have conceded that there are circumstances which give an occasion for the protest. It would be difficult to conceive of any system—human nature being what it is—which did not afford an occasion. But when the socialist inveighs against society as unjust and selfish, does he propose to overcome the evil that is denounced with good? Is he not setting up another selfishness in opposition to that which he arraigns? In making the interests of labour and of the labourer the one point and goal; in ignoring the elements that minister to the higher taste and culture except in so far as they can be harmonised with a working-class standard of utilities; in confining all his perspectives within the range of a material good and a material paradise, is he not evoking, and providing nourishment for, a very intense and de-toning selfishness?

Socialism, again, holds aloft the banner of brotherhood. Its altruism is that of a fraternity whose method is co-operation, whose *noblesse oblige* is the sense of membership one in another. This it learned of Christ; and it is a reproach to the Church which bears His name that the practical applications of its Lord's new covenant are often more striking in associations that con-

nect only with the outer circle of Christianity than they are within its gates. But when we scan the socialistic fraternity, what do we see? It is a fraternity that is not based on the consciousness of a higher relation—that of sonship to God. Some socialists recognise this; but, in being Christian socialists, they part from the body of opinion which represents all that is most active and influential. In its federation, there is no reference to the authority and example of a supreme love which “will endure when all that seems shall suffer shock.” It is essentially a class brotherhood for the furtherance of class interests and ends—interests and ends which, according to its programme, can be secured only through expropriations and confiscations that go perilously near to the violation of the command, “Thou shalt not steal,” and which, if secured by the method proposed, would involve the drying up of the springs of individual liberty and energy—the triumph of a partial proletariat to-day, at the cost of a universal proletariat to-morrow. The notes of the old Bethlehem song are not heard in it: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.”

It is maintained that the aim of socialism is the establishment of social righteousness; and it would be unjust to deny that this is within the view of

its supporters. The objection taken is not to the end intended; it is to the omission of an antecedent condition which is essential to the attainment of the end. That condition is personal righteousness. According to Mr Karl Pearson, the differentiation of socialism from other political and social movements is that it identifies morality with the polity which it presents.¹ The seat of morality is thus transferred to the system. Righteousness consists in submitting to it and in promoting it. But the oracle is silent on the question, how the harmony between the individual and this social happiness is to be effected. A man is not a mere atom that can be fitted into a place. He is a person with a free activity, with a will, and with a force that may be anarchic; one in whom there is a conflict between inclinations, between a law in his members and another and higher law of his mind. He needs to be set right, and no mere economic conditions can do this. Irruptions of passion; the corrosive power of selfishness; the promptings of ambition, of greed, of a desire for mastery rather than ministry; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life; tendencies to indolence and indulgence, to weakness, wilfulness, waywardness of temper,—these cannot be disregarded.

¹ *Ut supra*, The Ethics of Free Thought, p. 29.

They will interfere with the acceptance of the most rational of ends; they will break through the most perfect of disciplines. How is the inward adjustment to be realised? Socialism has no place for the word sin: alas! human nature has.

The man and what he is in himself is not a consideration secondary to and dependent on that of his circumstances: it is the consideration on which his true wellbeing depends. In laying the whole stress on external conditions, in making these the main cause and the chief element of the earthly paradise, the system under review is ethically imperfect, and is inadequate to the purpose it contemplates—that of bringing in a new era, “a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.” A regenerated society means regenerated persons; persons with a right spirit, persons in whom there is a supreme power making the life consistent by an effective moral self-rule. And when this is belittled, the goal that is interpreted by an eloquent socialistic writer as “the perfecting of human nature in the whole hierarchy of functions, headed by the moral ones”¹ is certainly missed.

When its ethic is unsatisfactory, it is not

¹ Thomas Davidson, *The Moral Aspects of the Economic Question*, p. 11.

to be wondered at that, in the advocacy of socialism, an attitude of indifference, frequently of hostility, to the worship and ministry of the Church is developed. Not that this is true of all socialists; for, there are many such who are at the same time devout and earnest Christians, and there are others whose aversion is not to the Christian faith, which they sincerely hold, with reservations and interpretations at variance with orthodox standards, but to the existing constitutions and to the spirit and practice of the Churches. This latter class of socialists forms a kind of intermediary element between the Church and—as it must with sorrow be affirmed—the dominant tone and bearing of socialism. Who that has read both its more permanent and its more ephemeral expositions, and that has heard the talk and speeches of its adherents, is not familiar with invectives against the clergy, against the Church as the “peculiar” of the *bourgeoisie* and capitalist, as out of sympathy with the labourer and the struggle in behalf of labour, as toadying to the rich and despising the poor, as a miserable *simulacrum* of the religion which it neither apprehends nor teaches, and so forth. Now, whilst assuredly the Church is not free from blame; whilst, in its arrangements for worship,

a pretext may be found for the charge that its sanctuaries are meant for those who can pay; whilst the rich transgressor is sometimes shielded by the Church to which he is a liberal contributor; whilst ministers of religion have not realised the *rapport* they might have realised with social wants and aspirations; whilst all this and more may be granted, the root of the antipathy referred to is deeper than any objection that may be taken to the necessary imperfections of an ecclesiastical organisation. The root is a radical divergence from the religious ideal. Sometimes the cry is wild and fierce. "Our enemy," a congress at Geneva proclaimed, "is every abstract authority, whether called devil or good God, in the name of which priests have so long governed good souls." But, even when the voice is more subdued, there is no transcendancy or spirituality in it. Herzen, who was associated with Bakunin in the consolidation of Russian nihilism, but who afterwards separated himself from the revolutionary party which he had helped to form, spoke of socialism "as the new terrestrial religion in which there is to be neither God nor heaven."¹ And the whole effect of the philosophy which it inculcates is to eliminate the eternal and the

¹ Contemporary Socialism, p. 261.

spiritual. There is no need of a Saviour from sin; for, sin is not in its thought. The other world with what it calls "its stage properties" has no place whatever. It is entirely terrestrial. In the words of Professor Flint, "Even when it does not expressly deny the fundamental convictions on which Christianity rests, it ignores them. It leaves out of account God and divine law, sees in morality simply a means to generate happiness, and recognises no properly spiritual and eternal life. It conceives of the whole duty of mankind as consisting in the pursuit and production of social enjoyment. Hence its ideal of the highest good, and consequently of human conduct, is essentially different from the Christian ideal, and thus it necessarily comes into direct conflict with Christianity."¹

This earthliness in prospect, aim, and motive is infecting the life of the working classes in our country, and indeed is infecting the life of all classes. It is the cause underlying much of the alienation from social Christian worship that prevails. What can this worship mean to those whose whole interest is narrowed by the vision of a mere earthly paradise, and to whom the terms God, Christ, immortality, life

¹ *Socialism*, p. 461.

everlasting, contain no reality? In working-class centres, labour-churches are offered as a substitute for the churches which are denounced; and in these assemblies the "terrestrial religion," in the form of addresses on the rights of labour and the wrongs of the labourer, and on the principles and methods of the new economy, is preached. The evil charged against the Church of being a class assembly is presented in another form. It is the class interest, it is the controversy with society, it is the propagation of a certain type of opinion, that predominates. And, without as well as within the Sunday assembly, in the socialism of the chair and in that of the street, this type is in evidence.

The bearing and the duty of the Christian Church towards the socialism that has been reviewed is one of the most serious questions that we are bound to face. To some extent, as we have seen, there is an opposition between ideals, and this represents a divergence in spirit and in purpose, the widening of which would be disastrous to society. What needs to be demonstrated is that, on the one hand, the rejection of the spiritual aspect of life is an untruth to the conception of life as a whole, and that, on

the other hand, Christianity, in emphasising the spiritual, does not the less, but all the more, seek to promote all that contributes to social betterment. Paradises may be left out of account. The aim of the religion of Christ is to make the human life that is, more blessed and less accursed, fuller, richer, more distinctly in sight at once of all that it can be here, and of that vision of God which is supreme and eternal blessedness. How to prove this—how to incorporate the permanent truth of the system or systems whose features have been scanned with the practical religion of Jesus Christ, is the matter as to which there is abundant occasion for “a spirit not of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”

Patience is required. The entrance of a great idea, of a great regulative principle, into the living thought of men is always marked by crude theorising, by exaggerated assertion, by almost wild rushes in directions to which the idea seems to point. By-and-by, when theories are sifted and the soundness of schemes is tested, there comes that moderating influence which we call common-sense (unless, indeed, by some foolish action a catastrophe is precipitated). What is extreme is discounted, and such parts of schemes as approve themselves to reason are accepted and become

subservient to the common-weal. So it is at present. In a law-abiding country such as ours, with institutions that can be expanded and modified without the loss of historical continuity, we may hope that the unattainable will gradually fall out of view, and that a collectivism shall be realised, which, without suppressing individual freedom and energy, but rather stimulating and guiding it, shall secure more effective legislation and larger benefits for the community. To this end Christian citizenship should look and strive. It should have an open mind in the observation of every movement; keenly scrutinising all that seems at conflict with public and personal morality, but sympathetic with every wise endeavour to support the life of each part by the corporate action of the body politic. When we can work with others whose opinions are more pronounced than the Christian conscience can approve, for the furtherance of a really beneficial result (assuming that they will work with us), then let there be co-operation. This, surely, is the commandment of the love of man for Christ's sake.

Study of social life and social questions is requisite. The Church's diagnosis of social needs and evils may be faulty. It may be necessary, in loyalty to the Lord and to the age that calls

for service, to unlearn much, and to learn still more. Christ's house is bound only to Him and His supreme authority. It is not bound to any political economy; it is not committed to any form or method of government. In a lofty sense, it is to be "all things to all men, that it may gain some." If it would be faithful, it must wait on its Lord, not in the sanctuary only, but in the world into which it is sent, piercing beneath the surface of things into the inner places of humanity, into the submergencies of the population, into the secrets of all its struggles, that it may recognise the signal of His hand, that, through communion with His mind, it may understand what He is saying to it. In the Christian Social Unions of England and Scotland, we can hail the token of an increasing desire more thoroughly to reach to the rock-beds of social topics, and to apply the truths of Christ's teaching to them. These unions have an important mission; for, they may remind all that Churches must, on the one hand, guard against the dead-weight of worn-out conventionalisms, of adherence to mere use and wontness, and, on the other hand, against the adoption of hasty and ill-considered views. Truth is our aim. Forbid that, in the day in which we live, the Church of the Lord should reproduce the picture of the unready king.

On special issues, such as "the strikes" which occasionally raise desolating storms in the industrial world, the individual citizen, be he clergyman or layman, is entitled to think and speak for himself, though, if he is wise, he will be reticent in speech; but when the Church, in its unity, is represented, the utmost caution should be exercised. The late Bishop Westcott was a successful mediator in a great strife in his diocese. But he occupied an exceptionally high position: by the width of his sympathies, the fulness of his knowledge, and the soundness of his judgment, he was trusted as few men can be trusted; his capacity for such mediation was almost unique. Speaking generally, the plane of the Church's action is one, by no means apart from, yet not to be confused with, particular causes. It can most influence when it speaks its own message, and connects the facts and the developments of human life with that message; when, in the power of the Holy Spirit, it takes of the things of Christ and shows them in their relation to present-day experiences and demands. The fellowship for which it witnesses is the completing truth of all social aspiration and effort. In the latest work of the saintly bishop, to whom allusion has just been made, are words which interpret both the mission and the want of the

Church: "In the half-blind strivings towards a larger human communion we find, I believe, an expression of the characteristic want of our times, the want which Christ is waiting to satisfy. We need the outflow of a spiritual force among us which shall bring the deep conviction of the reality of this world-wide fellowship of men. We need it in our personal life, in our national life, in our religious life."¹

¹ Lessons from Work, p. 103.