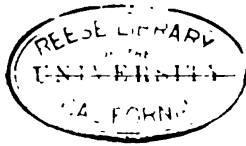


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POLITICAL AND SOCIAL.

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M.DCCC.LXXXIX.

ON THE STATE AS A CORRUPTING POWER.—1875-6 ?

THE efficacy of political institutions to mould a subject people, both morally and religiously, for better and for worse, is a formidable fact. What are the rightful claims of State Power, it has taken ages to settle. Christianity from the very first announced the necessity and sacred duty of obeying God rather than man, claiming hereby for the individual conscience an independence of corporate dictation concerning the commands of God ; and though a perpetual effort has been made, alike by royal power and by priestly doctrine, to revert to the heathen and Jewish idea that "Religion is corporate, not simply individual," yet the age is become ashamed of the persecuting and sanguinary struggle. The doctrine of private Conscience and the sanctity of its private relations with the Supreme Spirit of the Universe go forth conquering and to conquer.

Nevertheless, to state the right of Free Conscience is easier than to interpret it. Grave difficulties remain. The most liberal Protestants encounter them in the condemnation of even Defensive War by the Quakers. If a Quaker is urged by his religious conscience to distribute tracts among soldiers or sailors, dissuading them from defending their own country from invasion, it at once displays the difficulty of drawing a sharp line between the things of God and the things of "Cæsar." Moral duties are owing to the Community, yet they also are often laid down as a part of religion. Indeed the Roman Church has for ages claimed to dictate in every department of human life, on the plea that all moral action is under the control of religion ; and its recent pretensions are as unlimited as Innocent III. could desire. No abstract theory, however just, can obviate the possibility of a collision between moral duty as understood by individuals or by a Church, and moral duty as claimed of them by the State : but the probability of such collision will be greatly lessened, when the truth (which ought to be obvious) is confessed, that the function of Religion is only to intensify the desire to act rightly, not to decide what things are right. Human knowledge in Morals is earlier in time and more trustworthy, more certain as

Truth, than our knowledge in Supernaturalism. Mankind has a far more complete agreement as to Virtue and Vice, than on any Religious Creed. Hence every pretentious Religion is justly brought to the bar of Morals, and may be condemned at this tribunal as spurious: Morals never can justly be brought to the bar of Religion. Therefore Morals, as science, ought to be cultivated by us all *outside of* any special creed; and when this is done on system for a few generations, hostile schools in practical morals will cease to exist.

But however widely diffused may be a true theory of pure moral conduct, the grievous danger still remains, that the State power may be to a nation a corrupting instead of a purifying agency. As to the fact, there is no use in mincing matters. Bad laws, bad administration, bad moral example in the rulers, generate or intensify bad social customs, a corrupting atmosphere, evil practices and a prevalent low tone of moral judgment. Many a loud-mouthed cry is made, avowing the impossibility of promoting Virtue by Act of Parliament; but no one at all dares to deny that Vice may be promoted by evil law. Moreover, it is clearly visible, both on the face of the modern world and in all history, that the men who manage to thrust themselves into seats of power, or are carried into them by birth or other accident, seldom or never represent the highest virtue of the community, and that the more virtuous Statesmen are almost always outweighed by men of inferior moral worth, with whom they necessarily co-operate. In consequence, in all high politics appeal is made not to Justice and Right, but to Interests and Precedent, that is, to Custom; and moral epithets such as Unjust and Wicked are almost proscribed as unfit for a Parliament or a Statesman, *except in inveighing against a hostile Power*. So much homage they do pay to sound moral principle, as to demand *from the foreigner* a regard for Justice which they consider needless in their own conduct.

So long as the kingly or baronial power rested solely on military prowess,—as it did in all earlier history, and still does in all great empires,—it was on the whole beneficial that unarmed ecclesiastics, who claimed allegiance as representatives of moral Right, should stand up against men who represented nothing but brute Force.

With the ample page of History open to us, it is now no longer difficult to see both the complexity of the problem and the only practical solution; a solution which can only gradually develop

itself in proportion as masses of men understand and strive after Justice. The complexity of the problem was not understood. It was easy to see that brute Force was an insufficient basis for august Sovereignty; yet the stubborn fact is undeniable, that without superior force, no power, however wise and good, can perform the functions of government. The difficulty in practice is, that the goodness of individuals as rulers cannot be known or tested, until they have been entrusted with power; and the men who *love power*, though by no means the most trustworthy, are very subtle and persevering both to get and to keep it. Another enormous difficulty is, that even if every national institution had to be made new, no such joint deliberation and co-operation of wise citizens as might enlighten or overpower the unwise, would be possible. Every organization as yet known to mankind contains bad members as well as good, foolish members as well as wise, narrow-minded as well as large-hearted; nay, if power be given, or yielded unawares, to any Church, it presently becomes corrupted by the very fact; for ambitious men and hypocrites then steal into it and rise into it, seeking for self-elevation. To claim worldly power for saints as such (if it could ever so well be backed up by quoting of texts) is a deplorable folly; which would only repeat all the crusades and religious wars of past ages. Men (indeed, we must add, Women) have no security for their most elementary rights, if they are debarred from defensive political power: wholly to deprive them of such power, under whatever pretence, cannot yield the fruits of peace, justice, and good order. Nevertheless, the truth remains, which a Hebrew Psalm emphasizes: "The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted;" and a nation is liable to be depraved, if *bad* men are allowed to rule. Surely some practical duty presses upon *good* men as a result of this weighty truth. What then is it?

Solon, the celebrated lawgiver of Athens, nearly answered this question, when he insisted that it was the duty of every citizen to take part in political struggles, and not to remain neutral and inactive. But in our wider thought and experience a considerable change of phraseology is needed. We cannot but see that all national institutions in the past have grown up out of violent conquest; that *Justice has never been the aim of the conquerors*; that they have uniformly aimed to impose heavy burdens and extort for themselves services and wealth; granting to the conquered grudgingly any small means of self-defence;

and yielding, whatever they do yield, rather to fear or compulsion than to justice. *So long as the injustices introduced by conquest remain, in so far the national institutions are unjust.* As every good man strives to uproot from himself whatever is wrongful, and struggles towards a purer state, so ought every right-minded citizen to deal in political affairs. To maintain unjust institutions imposed by conquest *however distant in time or space*, implicates us, if not in the guilt (for we may be in ignorance of it), yet in the evil and dangerous heritage of guilt. As soon as injustice glares upon us, we are morally bound to take part against it. The same maxim is true, whatever the antiquity or the nature of the injustice. However old it may be, or however new, the striving of every man ought to be against it. Without this striving, no man deserves the epithet of *righteous*; no one can claim to be on the side of God; for the essence of Deity is opposed to every injustice. Subtle men, aiming at their own interest, who perhaps do not at all love injustice in the abstract, but are either blind to it or reckless of it when it promotes their ambition or their avarice—are constantly alert and active to deprave the law and pervert the administration—or to corrupt the nation by vices or by bribery. Our position as free citizens in a modern European community imposes on us new duties, to which there was no parallel among the first Christians.

This topic affords a clue to the solution of a large and painfully interesting question. "Why is it" (each reader of religious histories asks in turn) "that every new religion begins better than it continues, and none can spread over any continuous area without dire corruption?" It suffices here to allude to the early Persian religion, to Buddhism, to Islam, but pre-eminently to Christianity. A very superficial reply is, that it springs from the incurable depravity of human nature. It is not worth while here to deal with that pessimist and demoralizing theory. But on the surface of history it is clear, that as soon as any organization is discerned to invest power in its officers, be it called a Peerage, an Aristocracy, a Club, or a Church, ambitious men steal into it for personal selfish ends. There is no cure, except in proportion as the *mass* of private citizens actively concern themselves in upholding that which is their common interest, Universal Justice.