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FIVE CENTS

Religion and Labor

By E. Belfort Bax in "Justice."

A congress was held some months ago to consider the attitude of the rising power of labor to Religion, in which various notabilities of the religious, Labor and political world took part. It was hardly to be expected, we suppose, that the various religious sects should not make an attempt to "noble" the Labor Party. By religion, these sects naturally understand the Christian religion in some form or shape. Now, if by religion meant an ideal aim of social life and conduct, I am far from ignoring the need for the formulation of such an ideal as concerns Socialism—regarded as the goal of the Labor movement. But the attempt of Christian sects and sentimentalists to pour the new wine of political-economic and social striving into the old Christian bottles of individualistic soul-saving is another matter altogether. The Daily News' remarked on this point not long ago that "many persons" deemed that the power of labor must evolve its own religious ideal, apart from all extraneous influence. That such is the true view of the matter I regard as incontestable. And I further hold that it is the duty of Socialists to guard the movement from becoming infected with what I regard as the false idealism of the Christian faith in all its forms.

The time has come, I think, to speak out clearly on this issue. The Christian faith and its professors are loath to regard themselves as beaten. Driven from their clerical and dogmatic positions of yore, they are taking their stand on the ground of ethics and hero worship. It is surely important, harmless as this attenuated form if the Christian religion may appear to many, to oppose it equally with the dogmatic forms now beginning to "pale their ineffectual fire," if we are to clear our minds of cant. Labor generally, and more especially the Socialist Party, has to work its own religious, in the sense of idealistic, salvation—altogether apart from old shibboleths—out of its own innermost soul, and all harping upon superannuated catchwords and prejudices derived from bourgeois religious sentiment is an inevitable hindrance to this process of self-development.

The tendency of certain speeches at the Conference of Religion and Labor referred to, undoubtedly points in the above direction, whether we regard them as subtle devices of the enemy, of evil intent, or merely as the expression of the washy sentimentalism of narrow, if honest, minds.

Let us first of all take the somewhat stale denunciations of "materialism" which play so considerable a part in some of the speeches in question. Now "materialism" is an ambiguous word, and of this fact the partisans of current religion are not slow to take advantage.

"Materialism" may either mean low or sordid aims as opposed to higher idealistic and altruistic ones—money grubbing, profiteering, the sinking of the human soul in mere selfish gratification, or the pursuit of gain—or it may mean a philosophical history of the world, intrinsically opposed to the theological outlook on the said world. Now these two meanings of the word "materialism" have nothing whatever in common with each other. The one stands for a mode of life and conduct the other for a theory of the universe. But it is the trick of the popular Christian controversialist to mix up these

two meanings of "materialism," and thus to keep the term swimming in vagueness, so that they may appeal first to one sense in which it is used, and then to the other. If hard-pressed they will perhaps trot out the time-honored but impudent falsehood that the one leads to the other.

In other words, they will imply that the materialist Communist of Paris in 1871, who, as he expressed it, sacrificed his life on the barricade for "human solidarity," or the partisan of Russian freedom of the late nineteenth century, the Kropotkins, the Bourtzeffs, equally materialistic in their theory of the world, were sordid creatures of low aims compared with the lordly squire of high degree who is a pillar of the Church of England, or the Nonconformist manufacturer or shopkeeper who may be heard singing Christian hymns at his local Nonconformist tabernacle. Every impartial man with any knowledge of history must recognize the fact that while of course you may have men of high aims and unselfish conduct on both sides, yet if there is any difference it is in favor of those who hold the materialistic theory of the universe. For humane instincts and devotion to social well-being, the "religious" man has proportionately, with all his belief in Divine Providence, not shown up favorably as against the frank and outspoken "materialist."

There is another point which the hypnotism of tradition has engraved on the mind of men, and which in the interests of truth and the expulsion of cant from our midst it is time to call attention to. It is the notion of perfection ascribed to the figure portrayed in the Gospels as that of the founder of Christianity. We may here leave out of account the controversies now raging concerning the historical reality of the figure itself. I am content to take the character as portrayed—it matters not whether it be wholly mythical, partly mythical, or what not—and to challenge those who dilate on its unsurpassed beauty and excellence to give a reason for their ecstatic lucubrations on the subject. We have here to do with two things, the teaching and the life as professedly recorded. As regards the first it is a common-place now among scholars that there is not a single principle or precept contained in the Gospels that had not been previously enunciated by either Buddhists, Confucians, Parsees, Jewish Rabbis, or Greek thinkers—in short, that the much-belauded moral teaching of the Gospels is a crude mass of plagiarism from beginning to end. Now I must confess personally to having an old-fashioned prejudice against the appropriation without acknowledgment of the thoughts of other men, and to those who are guilty of it, and I imagine there may be others who, when the facts are placed before them, will share my view.

We come then to the life—i.e., the character as portrayed, whether real or fictitious. Now, I ask, apart from the hypnotism of convention and tradition, whether anyone reading the New Testament candidly can truthfully say that, in the isolated and somewhat thin delineations of a personality there depicted, he can discover any superlative excellence placing it (say) above the best of his contemporaries. "Justice" is not the place to discuss this matter in detail. It is sufficient here, for my purpose, to leave the matter in the hands of any honest investigator.

I can only say for myself that I can find persons who have worked in our own Socialist movement, who have never boasted that they were "meek and lowly of heart," or pressed upon public attention their difficulties in obtaining a night's lodgings, whom I can personally admire much more than the belauded Gospel figure. This may be, after all, a matter of taste, but my object in introducing the subject here is to urge upon the Labor and Socialist movement that it should clear its ideal of this particular "taste," which seems to me so strongly to savour of cant. Their ideal has, "au fond," no more to do with the Gospel teaching than it has with the Buddhist scriptures or the cult of Mithras. Let us hope that Socialism will not rest content to harp back upon the stale formulae of "creeds out-worn," but will work out its own conception of man's place as a social being in the universe.

Soviet Russia Medical Relief Committee

EDITOR'S NOTE.—We are asked to publish the following financial statement. Dr. Wm. Mendelson writes to say that many of our readers have contributed to this fund.

TREASURER'S FINANCIAL REPORT STATEMENT,
JUNE, 1920.

August, 2nd, 1920.	
Receipts.	
Contributions	\$3,684.91
Mass Meeting Detroit, June 20th	1,000.00
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	\$4,684.91
Expenditure.	
Printing and advertising	\$ 56.00
Clerical Help	115.00
Postage, Stationery and miscellaneous	158.62
Medical Supplies	2,500.00
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	\$2,829.62

TREASURER'S FINANCIAL STATEMENT, JULY, 1920

Receipts.	
Contributions	\$2,777.36
Mass Meeting, Phila. Comm.	500.00
Mass Meeting, Wash. Comm.	80.00
Mass Meeting and collections, Vancouver, B.C.	104.60
N. Y. Esthonian sub-comm.	104.20
N. Y. Lithuanian sub-comm.	70.00
Phila. Comm.	300.00
Detroit Comm.	500.00
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	\$4,436.16
Expenditures.	
Expenses Phila and Wash. meetings	\$ 95.00
Collection Canadian Cheques	16.35
Clerical help	75.00
Postage, Stationery and Miscellaneous	193.07
Medical Supplies	3,500.21
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	\$3,879.63

Balance

SUMMARIZED STATEMENT, APRIL TO JULY,
INCLUSIVE.

Receipts.
April, \$424.17; May, \$1,914.57; June, \$4,684.91; July,
\$4,436.16—\$11,459.81.

Expenditure.
April, \$126.26; May, \$1,779.01; June, \$2,829.62; July,
\$3,879.63—\$8,614.52. (\$7,000.21 for medical supplies).
August 1st, balance on hand, \$2,845.29.