

The Middle of the Road

As I read Philip Gibbs' story with the above title there came to my mind another phrase: "On the fence." Wherein do the two attitudes they represent differ? They differ as much as the left and right of the road differ. The man on the fence in matters of opinion and policy is not concerned about truth, but about majorities and will follow them when the issue is decided. The man on either side of the road has his mind made up and is concerned supremely about strengthening his position by argument, and to carry his side through. He is in danger of the fate of the man of whom it was said: "If the light that is in thee be darkness." He has in his favour, making it easy for him, the absolute conviction that his side is right, and the approval of majorities or minorities, and perhaps contempt for the other side. If he sees the case of the other side at all, he dismisses it with an ugly party name and passes on. There is a happy immunity from pain when the mind is closed.

He of the middle of the road finds things less easy. He winces many times as he finds himself mistaken for brother to the man on the fence, called a lefter or a righter, as the case may be, afraid to declare himself. He is misunderstood. Moreover, to add to his troubles, he does not know his own views. He is waiting for light and the interval of uncertainty is irksome. The confused cross lights so slowly become revealing light. He awaits the lens to collect and focus them, the lens, which some circumstance is to become. He is not a Peer Gynt who "will never go through a thing but around it," whose main purpose is to escape difficulty. He is going to commit himself at the earliest possible moment. Meantime the waiting costs. President Harper of Chicago, was taking the middle of the road when he was asked previous to a meeting called by him out of which has grown a great and influential organization: "Precisely what do you wish to accomplish at this meeting?" "Nothing," said he, "Ultimately we want to do something so great none of us could describe it." Decision is a noble quality, but decision at the right time with all the light in. A spice of the middle of the road quality had helped out the cause for which that rugged old hero, Elijah, stood that day on Mt. Carmel. It had restrained him in the hour of victory from putting the false prophets to the sword, and thus taking the edge off that victory. It had saved Jehu a little later from the bloody slaughter with which he enthroned his dynasty, but which afterwards rose against them.

I think Jesus Christ had to take the middle of the road. Amidst conflicting political, religious and social ideals, He took the good wherever He found it and left and right one day joined against Him, when Pharisees and Herodians began to conspire, agreed only on one thing, that they hated Him.

He came away from the temptation scene without any policy that committed to left or right but to the middle of the road. "By every word of God," and these words came to Him as He went His way, giving Him His cue from circumstances as they arose till He said: "I have finished the work Thou gavest Me to do."

Left and right with clearly defined opinions or prejudices are in evidence in the realm of Religion, Politics and Social Relationships. The way out of the jungle does not lie with either side; but with the man in the middle of the road who welcomes light no matter whence it comes, even if from his enemy, and who in some measure qualifies for the school of the Teacher Who said, "Learn of Me for I am meek and lowly of heart." Truth may grow in lonely situations, and awaits the teachable mind of the man in the middle of the road. When he has found it he has brought nearer the days of the Kingdom of God.

The autocracy of Lenin found an insuperable barrier to the working out of a well-knit theory that forgot psychology, in the refusal of the peasant to abdicate his right of self-determination. That was the rock on which Communism broke.

Individualist and Communist represent two extremes, the right and left if you will, in the realm of life and of things. The Egotist is concerned with that portion of personal energy which constitutes his own self. His care is to marshal all these forces to his own service. His personality is a walled city so far as giving is concerned, but a fortress that exacts tribute of all personality around. At the opposite extreme from the Egotist is that flabby, incohesive mass of personal possibility, which because lacking self-determination, is a sort of spiritual common that is at the mercy of every chance influence, and because giving itself indiscriminately never achieves an individuality, remaining an echo or reflection of the last influence. Imagine all the personal force in the world to be of this kind, what would happen? Personality, character, life, would surely be poor—no initiative, no achievement, no progress. If, on the other hand, all personality were of the Egotist type a chronic state of war would ensue. A third combination might be that of the two types issuing in a Communism ruled by Autocracy, being the spiritual counterpart of the experiment in the realm of things tried by Lenin.

By none of these ways can the finest type of life be produced: but rather by allowing to all a nucleus of self-determination, a sacred preserve as the core of personality where the OUGHT and the MUST of being and doing reside, and from which is decreed a self giving, to enrich other selves and to accept benefits from them in a reciprocity which is love.

Just as in the realm of being, the ideal is neither Individualism nor a Communism such as is suggested above, so, in the realm of things, an absolute individualism or communism will be futile unless we posit a dictator which it is easier to imagine than discover; and were he discovered, it were only to destroy the personality of the dictated to, for the sake of bread, and "man shall not live by bread alone."

The ideal in the realm of things, is parallel to that in life or personality; a nucleus of right of possession and with it a recognition of responsibility to use these privileges for the benefit of the other. The ideal Communism has at the core of it the privilege to call something in the realm of things by the name; what I possess rather than my own. The right must be conceded to the individual to determine within himself how he shall dispose of it, and when he has learned to determine that it shall be not his own, he will find the greatest personal enrichment from it and all life will be richer.

The middle of the road attitude is that which recognizes that there is a good at the heart of extreme individualism which must be reclaimed for the new order that is to be, that there is a good in Communism which must be rescued from the domain of force and compulsion. It sees with open eyes the evils of the present order, refuses to give blind allegiance to the untried which forgets that the biggest values are spiritual and that a free spirit is not the necessary result of a body well fed, and "six hours a day."

The first search of him who walks the middle of the road is the secret whereby the new man that is equal to the task of the ideal Communism can be produced, and to find what is meant by the words of the Middle-Roader Who said: "Except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven." It is the task of Education and Religion to make possible this new man.

—A. D. M.