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RELIGION AND THE WAR

Prepared for

The General Assembly's Commission
on the War
and the Spiritual Life of the Church

BY

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Religion and the War.

(PROF. FALCONER)

I.

THE VISION OF SIN.

The war has uncovered the hideous features of evil. By its entail of calamity it has confirmed the Scripture, "Sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death." We had been flattering ourselves upon the progress of the world and on the manner in which by slow evolution man had laid aside the baser aspects of nature and had put on the finer garments of modern civilization. We were priding ourselves on our refinement, our ability, our humanism, thinking that culture was winning its way towards a human perfectibility. We were coming to look upon the earth as the natural home of virtue, and as a place where the children of God might find their rest. This was, we were saying, the best possible of worlds where vision and realization were met together. Even the Church had begun to forget that this is an evil world, where the children of the Heavenly Father cannot go on their way unmolested.

But we have suddenly been disillusioned, and are now faced with a spectacle such as seldom has been beheld. The theory of progressive development has been rudely shaken as it has come into conflict with a sudden upheaval of moral perverseness, such as we read of in the apocalyptic visions of Scripture. The very throne of Christian truth has been assailed; the court of heavenly virtues has been attacked; the primary teachings of the Gospel of Jesus have been flouted and despised. There has been, as one says, "A great conspiracy against the Christian conception of life." So that at a time when we expected to lay aside our weapons, there has come this call to arms. The dragon who we thought had been slain has reappeared, and we must cry aloud for Michael and his sword.

The war has cleared the air. The teutonic apostasy has become a touchstone for our age, and has proved to be one of the best interpreters of existing problems that we have had. In this giant evil and its disastrous consequences we see more clearly the character of sin as it moves about in our midst in lesser forms: for the same malign influences that brought on the war are at work in many other directions.

SELFISHNESS.

We recognize how prevalent is the sin of selfishness. This lies at the root of many of the troubles that disfigure our social life. We have the crude and admittedly criminal selfishness of those who make gain out of the weakness of their brethren, intemperance and lust, and there is the respectable selfishness that pleads special talent or privilege as a fitting excuse for taking undue advantage, and which regards success as a justification for self-indulgence.

The rivalry of classes, the envious hatred of the success of others, the heartlessness of avarice, show themselves in the unhappy conditions of the land. Some years ago G. F. Watts, who exercised the prophetic office by means of the artist's brush, painted a picture called "Mammon," in which the dull and cruel Moloch of greed sits upon his throne crushing by his weight the slender forms of virtue, beauty and innocence. The brutal stupidity and heartlessness of this loathsome face were meant to be the artist's arraignment of those in his generation who were making money their idol, and who in the worship of this false god were being led into the various forms of cruelty and wrong. This selfishness, which has won its way into the heart of so many people and has removed from them all spiritual perception, stands forth condemned by the inexorable judgment of the war.

WORLDLINESS.

There is also worldliness, which must not be mistaken for a justifiable interest in the lawful pursuits and glories of our calling, or for a commendable desire to exercise those talents which have been committed to us. Worldliness is an absorption in the things of sense and time which takes no consideration of the three great facts of religion, God, the soul and eternity. It is not occupation, but preoccupation with the affairs of this life. This spirit of the world manifests itself in the way in which people plunge themselves into the gaieties around them, rush after the passing vanities, never resist the appeals of self-indulgence, nor question the popular standards of the passing hour. These have no reverence for the high and generous impulses of idealism, are indifferent to the majestic voice of duty, and have no welcome to give to the thought of God's approach to their souls. Such worldliness excludes godliness, "For if any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him." It also shuts out all true humanity, seeing that it accepts no responsibility for the disorder of society, nor ever dreams that we are our brother's keeper.

THE CHRISTIAN WARFARE.

Thus the conflict between Jesus and the Prince of this world continues. Still we have to wrestle against the rulers of the darkness of this world. Still the Kingdom of God is a far away melody. The wrongs and cruelties of this *land of peace* are apparent to every one who has eyes to see, and they must be grievous in the sight of God, as are the cruelties of war. In the sorrows of the poor, in the injustice to the down-trodden, in the contempt for Christian truth, in the many social wrongs, in the rivalries of the Church in the great mission of bringing Christ to the world, in the waywardness and irreligion of our sinful hearts, we may find opportunities for putting on the whole armour of Christ and providing ourselves with this "moral equivalent for war."

The Church has not been sufficiently aroused to the true state of the world. She has not felt as she should the burden of her Master, who was moved with compassion when He saw us like sheep without a shepherd. She has acquiesced in existing conditions as inevitable and beyond reformation, or in her undue love for peace she has sometimes defended existing inequalities, and taken the side against those who were struggling to remove the unfair advantage of wealth and influence. The Church has not always bent down like an angel of mercy to hear the cry of the oppressed and the forsaken. How many are there who wait beneath the dull shadows of sorrow, poverty or despair, who see no ray of hope in the sombre sky, but who are none the less the very ones for whom Jesus came! He came to preach deliverance to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind, and to proclaim the message "of joy in wisest commonalty spread."

The Christian disciple is to go out as a member of an army prepared to do battle with all the aggressors of evil. We must not plead the invincibility of sin, or the weakness of our forces. We must pull down the stronghold of vice and cruelty, and realize with clear knowledge that as long as we are in the world and desire to follow Jesus, we are in a state of war. "I came not to bring peace, but a sword."

II.

HUMAN ENDURANCE.

If the war has laid bare the powers of evil it has also revealed to us the capacities of endurance and sacrifice that lie dormant in human souls. Some had come to fear that

the race was growing soft and enfeebled, unfitted for any heroic task, unable to make sacrifices. One distinguished writer went so far as to regard with equanimity, or without much apparent dismay, the conclusion that we were less able to endure hardship and that the increase of comforts had robbed us of the ability to stand up against such odds as were known to the martyrs of early Christianity, or even to our forefathers in the land.

But their fears have been dissipated, and we know that the race is as robust as ever. The fact of voluntary enlistment in itself implied a decisive choice involving great sacrifices. It meant in many cases a conscious abandonment of many of the dearest hopes of life.

“These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth.”

And throughout the campaign the heights of endurance to which our soldiers have at times attained, fill us with admiration and amazement. Moreover, they have discovered that such endurance has guided them into unexpected fulness of joy. They have been rewarded with the richest wages, and have learned that the music of eternal things can only be heard by those who endure. Sacrifice for some worthy object has flooded the heart with a quite new emotion. The soul has found itself in the midst of the supreme activities of life.

CHRISTIAN SACRIFICE.

Here the war has again been a revealer and has laid bare the secret of the Christian faith. It is a similar choice which the sincere convert makes when he professes his faith and promises to follow Jesus. Christian life begins in an act of self-renunciation and dedication. And when we penetrate to the heart of Christianity we find that whether it be the Incarnation or the Atonement, each of these is ultimately the expression of unselfish love that is ready to endure all things for the salvation of the world. Our religion is neither a doctrinal statement nor a sacramental mystery; it is the manifestation of a heavenly love that will suffer no loss or failure to hinder this divine labour of redemption.

As we think on the sacrifices that have been made by so many, we cannot fail to realize the poverty and hypocrisy of much of our religious profession. In Amiel's "Journal" there is an account of the manner in which on a Good Friday the writer suddenly remembered that it was a time that celebrated the utter and complete self-denial of Jesus, and he

went forth self-rebuked that he could take so dispassionately a day associated with such self-forgetting endurance.

The sacrifices of our soldiers and of those who bear the sorrow at home, ought to rebuke our indolence, and stir us up to more fidelity of service. Are we to allow the appeal of patriotism to call forth more heroism than does the Kingdom of God? Is not Christ the sublimest of all appeals? In imagination let us visit the scenes of battle and let us do it frequently, because those who fight are doing so on our behalf; let us go to those lands where the shadow of death is ever hovering near, where the cruelties of warfare are engraving pictures on the memories of our youth, dark tragedies, which no happy future can ever efface, where the young become prematurely old, and this exercise of the imagination will surely help us to remember the duty of endurance which every faithful service brings.

MENTAL STRUGGLE.

For some this war may be a call to a more ardent intellectual struggle. There is much unreality about our thinking and many opinions are accepted merely on external authority. Some are content with conventional beliefs, while others may fear to examine their convictions lest under the searching light of modern scientific investigation these may prove insufficient. Mental lethargy is one of our enemies, and we naturally shrink from the labor which the pursuit of truth must ever bring. But there must always be a class of people, those who guide public opinion, whose duty it is seriously and honestly to face the changes which our new age has brought. It is inconceivable that the advances made in all departments during these wonderful years should have no effect on the presentation of the truth of Christianity. We believe that Christ is the one final solution to all the deepest problems of the human soul, but we can only present Him acceptably as the universal Redeemer as we acquaint ourselves with the modern mind. There is a large opportunity awaiting these Christian thinkers who, with humility and prayer and in the spirit of Jesus, will devote their time to this effort of reconciling the new discoveries of our country with the eternal truth of the Gospel. It is a long-drawn campaign to which we are called when we seek to discipline our mind; for we have to be on our guard against wayward imagination, we require to bring every thought into subjection to Jesus; and we can only then work out our intellectual reconstruction to any final advantage when we have made

the deep things of the Spirit the controlling element in our search.

THE SOCIAL TASK.

There are many whom the call to arms will summon to a greater dedication of their efforts to the practical duties of the Christian faith. The enjoyment of religion, the assurance of personal salvation, individual peace and communion, must not be allowed to obscure the fact that Jesus calls us to a brotherhood and a social fellowship. We would bear in mind that unaffected goodness is quite as Christian as facility in prayer, that kindness and courtesy are as pleasing to God as regularity of worship. The divine function of the Christ is only fulfilled when the worshipper passes out of the House of God into that larger house of mankind so full of those who await our help and sympathy. When Jesus had enjoyed the Sabbath ritual of the temple at Jerusalem He passed out to heal the impotent man at the Pool of Bethesda.

The testimony of personal sacrifice for the good of others is a most powerful defence of our religion. Every one can understand the language of kindness and mercy. Every one can distinguish the badge of discipleship given by Jesus, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." As long as the Church can inspire her members to acts of such brotherly love, there can be no peril for the cause of Christ. Humanly speaking, the future of the Church depends upon the self-denying labors of her members.

III.

NEW STANDARDS.

For all of us this war is a clarion call to new dedication. There comes a time in some experiences when a new stage of efficiency is reached, when the former standards are suddenly left behind, and a man finds himself able to accomplish far more than he thought possible. He discovers new stores of energy, richer capabilities, larger endurance, fresh springs of joy. And just as this war has brought new standards to our youth, so may it all do for the Church.

This is a summons to leave behind us old prejudices, selfish denominational and party rivalries, and to go forward more heartily to the service of God and our brethren. We must aim at a more complete organization of the spiritual forces at our disposal by eliminating all waste, and by making our

appeal to the largest possible number. For this purpose let us make it evident how many-sided is the service of Christ and how joy-promoting is religious effort. We must touch the undeveloped reservoirs of inspiration, and be able to draw forth the willing allegiance of all whose ideals are pure and lofty and who cherish deeds of great enterprise. Let us represent Christianity as a sublime adventure. Thus nourishing the life of the Church we shall infuse more red, rich blood into what has too often been a pale and sickly faith.

Then we may work with more singleness of aim for the speedy consummation of the hopes of the Gospel, may strive more zealously for a warmer and more passionate affection for Jesus, and may labor with unremitting constancy for the removal of those evils that degrade our country, ever sustained by the assurance that we are not without the help of spiritual unseen forces, and that the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of Jesus is assured; "He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet."

IV.

THE BEREAVED.

The closing word must concern that large number, ever on the increase, for whom this war has meant great personal calamity. It has robbed many of the hopes which once brightened their days; it has taken from them the sweetest possessions they had. Henceforth they must continue their journey with their earthly dreams to a large extent shattered.

For these, religion has its consolation. Sorrows will not be wasted if they urge such people, who have seen the insufficiency of earthly hopes, to set their affection upon things eternal. By this rough road of pain God may bring them to the promised land of spiritual communion, where they may attain slowly to that perfection which, even in the case of Jesus, was accomplished through suffering. Sorrow leads its willing votaries far within the mysteries of truth and character.

Besides this, these hopes are not lost forever, but only obscured for awhile. Those who die with the name of Jesus in their hearts, and they are more than we think, are not really dead. They live with a more complete vigor, with a more joyous freedom. No injury can come to these, and thoughts concerning them may be peaceful thoughts and void

of worry. We may safely leave them in the keeping of a gracious Father.

Shall God be wroth because we love them still?
And call upon His love to shield from ill
Our dearest, best;
And bring them home, and recompense their pain,
And cleanse their sin, if any sin remain,
And give them rest?

