

Religion and Society

Decline of Religious Faith, the Root Cause of Sickness of Modern Society

Religion and education is now engaging wide attention throughout the British Empire, and outstanding in the opinions being expressed is the strong swing that is being made from the secular system of training. Recently the Bishop of Ballarat stoutly refuted the claims advanced in a series of Press correspondence in Melbourne that ethics without religion could be satisfactorily taught to children. He further refuted that religion was "based upon irrational and superstitious ideas." Since then one of the leading daily papers of Australia, the Adelaide Advertiser, attacks the modern paganism of education.

After declaring that the root cause of the sickness of modern society is to be found in the decline of religious faith, and the consequent disintegration of public and private morals, the Advertiser says:

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, and even in the earlier part of the twentieth, many "advanced" people supposed that the abandonment of Christian faith might occur without any corresponding abandonment of Christian morality. They might cease believing as Christians had hitherto believed without ceasing to behave as Christians had hitherto behaved. The modern "humanist," it was contended, might still acknowledge the ethical imperatives of the New Testament, though repudiating the supernatural background with which these imperatives have been historically associated. This was the attitude of writers like John Stuart Mill, John Morley, "George Eliot," and Mrs Humphry Ward. **The fallacy is now tragically apparent.**

Once the foundations of Christian faith are undermined the Christian ethic, which is, after all, only a superstructure, is logically bound to collapse. If God be ruled out, it becomes extremely difficult to believe in the objectivity of moral principles and ideals. There is an intimate and inescapable connection between what we think about the ultimate meaning of the universe and what we think about the aims and ends of human life. What we do will be profoundly influenced, if not altogether determined, by the kind of world we suppose ourselves to be living in. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

This commonsense line of argument is powerfully reinforced by a study of what has actually happened. Having surrendered the idea that morality is grounded in the will of God and the nature of reality, people have tended to adopt one of two alternatives. In some countries, the head of the State has usurped the place of God; and millions have been persuaded to identify morality with the will of some upstart dictator. This has the advantage of saving people from the trouble of thinking, which to many, is a very great trouble indeed.

Christian standards have been not so much rejected as inverted. Arrogance and cruelty, falsehood and treachery, have been invested with the character of virtues. Anything is right which promotes the ends of the State. The appalling results of this philosophy are so well known that illustration is unnecessary. The other alternative, which also has been adopted by millions, is to identify morality with what is genially described as the "self-expression" of the individual, which means, in practice, that anybody is to be free to do just as he pleases, without regard to what are called "outworn traditions" and "moth-eaten conventions." **The fruits of this attitude appear in the multiplication of divorces and the breakdown of family life.**

There has been an altogether excessive emphasis on "rights" and an altogether inadequate realisation of "duties." Even the children have caught this spirit, as is evidenced by the increase in what is called "juvenile delinquency." It would appear that of the two alternatives to Christian morality, the former leads to an intolerable tyranny and the latter to an intolerable anarchy. This, we imagine, accounts for the stress laid by the Christian leaders on the idea of a transcendent and immutable moral law.

Most serious is the reaction of modern paganism on education. It is really impossible to construct any intelligible system of education, unless we have at least some idea of the kind of person we want to produce. "Arnold of Rugby" made a revolution in education when he deliberately set himself to produce what he called "a Christian gentleman." The maintenance of a

healthy society depends on people getting the kind of education which will induce and inspire them to subordinate their self-regarding impulses to their other-regarding impulses.

The strength of society depends on the prevalence among its members of a spirit of altruism. The natural place for the cultivation of this spirit is the well-ordered family; which is why the Christian ethic has always laid such stress on the sanctity of the marriage bond and the maintenance of family life.

Within the intimate circle of the home, mutual love inspires a spirit of "give and take." Nothing, however, more powerfully contributes to the altruistic outlook than a deep sense of religious obligation.

Christians regard the life of service and sacrifice as springing from the will of God Himself; a religion which centres on the Cross cannot be other than profoundly and passionately altruistic. Piety towards God has, as its counterpart on the human side, charity towards all.

In the absence of this altruistic spirit, no plans or programmes can possibly secure that better world we long to see. Our political and social problems; complex as they are, can be solved only in an atmosphere of goodwill. To engender this spirit of goodwill is the task of the Churches. Everything will depend on the extent to which the people respond to their appeal.

—Church Chronicle, Ballarat.

SALACIOUS LITERATURE.

Arising out of its outspoken comment by the London Church Times concerning the quantity of salacious literature passing from counter to customer, it is explained that this kind of reading came from overseas, as it was seldom printed in England. It was mentioned that by one large firm alone 130 titles of these periodical journals were listed.

Touching on this matter, the Church Chronicle, Ballarat, raises the following queries:—(1) How is it that in wartime, when there is need for drastic economy in the use of paper, a supply of paper can be found on which to print this kind of thing? (2) How comes it that shipping space which should be filled with food and the essentials of life, if not of munitions, should be made available for such cheap nastiness? (3) Is any of this nauseous contamination reaching Australia?

The hope was expressed that the authorities in Australia were vigilant in watching the activities of dealers in tainted literature. The same vigilance is just as needful in New Zealand.