

SIN AND SOCIAL WELFARE

IN pre-Reformation England religious orders undertook the main share of what is in modern parlance known as social or welfare work, that is, the care or relief of the sick, the fatherless, the needy and the aged. After the Reformation this kind of work was apt to be neglected, or undertaken in a somewhat inhuman spirit under the auspices of the Poor Law. By the eighteenth century, however, the country's conscience began to be stirred by the sight of so much misery, and hospitals, orphanages and rescue homes were founded by public subscription or private philanthropy. This good work continued throughout the nineteenth century, inspired generally by religious principles and in the main sponsored by various religious organisations. By the end of the century, however, a more scientific approach to social work began to manifest itself. The Charity Organisation Society was founded to discourage indiscriminate almsgiving and substitute an organised system based on family case-work, and the Webbs, although they disapproved strongly of C.O.S. methods, were among the most vociferous champions of a more scientific approach to social problems.

This scientific attitude has in our century led to the transformation of the social worker from a well-meaning amateur, usually with a strong sense of vocation, into a trained professional. Most social service posts advertised today require of applicants a Diploma in Social Science such as is granted by universities on completion of a course both academic and practical. The academic part includes study of such subjects as constitutional and economic history, economics, political theory, local government and psychology. More and more emphasis is being laid on the last-named, perhaps not altogether to the good of social work, for psychology, although it has great diagnostic and therapeutic value in expert hands, is apt to be a dangerous weapon in the hands of those with only superficial knowledge of the subject—dangerous both to worker and 'case', for the worker may be deluded into supposing that psychology is the remedy for all social and moral ills, and the 'case' injured by unwise treatment in the name of psychology.

Not only is the modern social worker more highly trained than his nineteenth century predecessor, but he is more and more likely to be employed by the State instead of by a voluntary organisation. This advance of the State into the field of social service is due to a variety of causes, political and economic. Many people, including some who would hesitate to proclaim themselves socialists, maintain that such work ought to be undertaken by the State, on the grounds that what is the concern of all should be the responsibility of all.

In pre-Reformation England the Church may have been the appropriate organisation through which this national responsibility could be assumed, since at that time all Englishmen belonged to the Church, but today, it is argued, the State is the only organisation fitted for the purpose. It has been suggested, indeed, that the modern 'social service' State represents a secularisation and expansion of religious ideals. This proposition will be discussed later.

The gradual transformation of social work is well illustrated by the history of what is today commonly called 'moral welfare' work. The reclamation and reformation of women and girls of immoral life have for many centuries been undertaken in Catholic countries by various religious congregations, some of which were founded for this especial purpose. In post-Reformation England the work was somewhat neglected until the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Magdalen Hospital, described as a 'Public Place of Reception for Penitent Prostitutes', was founded by public subscription. This worthy foundation was conducted on strictly religious lines, although the type of religion practised would probably not commend itself to modern tastes. A quaint engraving which forms the frontispiece to an eighteenth century edition of the rules and regulations of the Hospital gives a prominent place to a forbidding-looking building inscribed 'Chapel'. It should be emphasised that the inmates were frankly recognised as sinners, that they sought admission voluntarily and were expected to show their penitence by fitting themselves to earn an honest living on their discharge. The nineteenth century saw a great expansion of 'rescue' work, all of it undertaken by various religious bodies. Many of the Catholic religious congregations now returning to England, and the Anglican sisterhoods founded under the influence of the Oxford Movement, devoted themselves to the reclamation of penitents, while the Church of England, the Nonconformist bodies, the Salvation Army and the Jewish community all ventured into the field, undertaking both institutional and 'outdoor' work. This work has undergone various significant changes in nomenclature. Beginning as 'rescue' work, it next became 'rescue and preventive', then, as the value of prevention came more and more to be recognised, 'preventive and rescue', and finally 'moral welfare'. Today ill-informed public opinion associates 'moral welfare' almost exclusively with the assistance of unmarried mothers, and as this is but a small part of the work now undertaken a new title seems desirable.

The State came into the moral welfare field to a limited extent with the Children Act of 1908, and to a much greater extent with the Children and Young Persons Act of 1933, which authorised

Juvenile Courts to deal with certain classes of children and young persons under 17 'in need of care and protection'. In practice these have included many girls of immoral life, and since the Act came into force more and more such girls have been dealt with by the courts instead of by voluntary bodies. In consequence the voluntary homes have found their numbers declining and some of them, including their prototype, the Magdalen Hospital, have applied for Home Office certification as Approved Schools for the reception of court cases. This transformation of moral welfare work could be paralleled in other fields. Voluntary police court missionaries have become State probation officers and, on a much wider scale, the care of the sick and the education of the young, once the province of the Church, have now come into the hands of the State.

This modern professionalisation and State control of social work have far-reaching consequences, which can conveniently be considered with reference to some remarks made above concerning the Magdalen Hospital.

In the first place, the Magdalen was run on a religious basis, and it is by loss of this that social work has suffered most grievously in being taken over by the State. Those people who regard Christianity as no more than a system of morals can assent to the proposition, already mentioned, that the State which undertakes social work is practising applied Christianity. Those who see something more in their religion than feeding the hungry or clothing the naked, however, must realise that such 'State Christianity' is a poor substitute for the real thing, although it is the best the State can provide when its citizens belong to a variety of religious denominations. Even when, as in this country, there is an Established Church, the State must consider the susceptibilities of the substantial minority which does not belong to that church and which is compelled to contribute through taxes to the State's expenditure on welfare work. The kind of religious inspiration which the State can offer is therefore on a par with the religious instruction it can impart in its schools, a kind of lowest common denominator designed to offend nobody.

Now, although quite a lot of good social work can be done without reference to religion, this is very liable to be done with the wrong end in view—i.e. the improvement of material conditions in this life without reference to another life. Improvement of material conditions is all very well and good in its proper place, but if regarded as the sole end of social work it is apt to lead the social worker into grievous errors. The worker confronted with the care of incurables, for example, may feel that euthanasia is the best

remedy in certain cases, while his colleague dealing with mental deficiency probably thinks that his job would be lighter if sterilisation, legalised abortion or contraceptives could be employed to prevent some of the defectives from being born. The Catholic may inveigh against such practices but his point of view, which relates the sufferings of this life to the true end of man, will hardly be acceptable to the non-Catholic social worker or reformer who sees only the suffering. There are, of course, many Catholic and other Christian social workers in state employ, and they undoubtedly act according to their religious principles, but they are hampered in that their employer does not always endorse those principles and may even advocate policies directly contrary to them.

Other dangers and disadvantages which arise when God is left out of social work may be illustrated by comparison with the original aims and methods of the Magdalen Hospital. We said above that the inmates were recognised as sinners, sought admission voluntarily and were expected to show their penitence. 'Sin' and 'penitence' are not popular words today ('maladjustment' and 're-adjustment' sound nicer), yet without them it is difficult to see how social workers can find a sound basis for the reformation of offenders against accepted moral standards or the criminal law. Morality divorced from God is apt to be a relative thing, often based on expediency rather than principle. A worker dealing with, say, a young girl who has drifted into an immoral life, may threaten her with venereal disease or an illegitimate baby, but this threat has decidedly less force than it had fifty years ago, and in any case a morality based on fear is not of much value. The worker may talk of accepted standards or of conventional behaviour, but ideas of what is acceptable vary from time to time and convention is apt to condone the discreet sin and condemn only the crime of being found out. Finally, he may talk vaguely of 'living a clean life' or 'being a good citizen', but the 'case' may retort that her life is her own to live as she pleases. Unless she can be brought to realise that she has sinned against God, she cannot come to a true state of penitence. The worker is in a still more difficult position if his 'case' has not sought help voluntarily but has been committed to an Approved School by a Juvenile Court. The delinquent, far from being penitent, is more likely to be burning with resentment against those responsible for her present place of abode and thus unresponsive to efforts at reformation.

Social work undertaken by the State, or by any other non-religious organisation is thus, by ignoring the true end of man, in danger of using wrong methods and lacks a sound basis for reformation. State

social work does, of course, shine on the material side, and with the funds at its disposal is often able to provide better buildings and equipment than the voluntary organisations. Too many people today, unfortunately, are apt to judge on material equipment alone. The Curtis Report, although by no means generally unfavourable to the work of religious organisations, criticised Convent homes on the grounds that they often imposed on the children the same austerities as were embraced voluntarily by the nuns. The same Report quoted the daily time-table of a Convent home and commented unfavourably on it, which comment may be taken to include the daily Mass and Benediction. To the Catholic, of course, these would be a privilege rather than a hardship, but in this context they appear rather as an unnecessary addition to an already heavy time-table.

Again, we find the same tendencies to ignore the final end of man and to minimise the freedom and therefore responsibility of his human will in the modern attitude towards the young people who commit crimes. The old dictum concerning the result of sparing the rod finds little support among modern penologists, who, indeed, are much more worried about the possible 'spoiling' of the child resulting from using the rod. Our approach to the problem of juvenile delinquency is far enough removed from that of our ancestors of a hundred years ago, who hanged, transported or imprisoned child-offenders exactly as if they were adult criminals. Today the offender under seventeen is brought before a court which resembles as little as possible an ordinary criminal court and which, in the words of the Children and Young Persons Act, is supposed 'to have regard to the welfare of the child or young person' brought before it. This court has at its disposal a variety of methods—of punishment, one would normally say, but it is becoming increasingly common to substitute the word 'treatment' in this context—but the more drastic of these, particularly corporal punishment, are becoming more and more unpopular in penological circles. The Juvenile Court is, in fact, being urged to spare the rod as much as possible.

In this country juvenile delinquency still comes within the framework of the criminal law, but elsewhere, notably in the Scandinavian countries, this is not always the case. In Norway, Sweden and Denmark the young offender is regarded as a welfare case instead of a criminal case, and is dealt with by a special council which is in no sense a criminal court. This system is, indeed, the logical application of the proposition frequently put forward today that juvenile delinquency is primarily the outcome of an unfavourable social and economic environment or, alternatively, one among many

ways of manifesting psychological maladjustment. If little Tommy, whose parents treat him unwisely, steals from Woolworths because he is maladjusted at home it is surely unfair to brand him as a juvenile delinquent while Billy, who, with a similar home environment, exhibits his maladjustment by lying on the floor and screaming at frequent intervals, is regarded as a case for the Child Guidance Clinic. To apply different methods of treatment to these two cases, as we do in this country, argues either a want of logic or a realisation that stealing is essentially a more serious matter than screaming. Want of logic is probably the right answer, for the Juvenile Court before which Tommy appears will probably pass him on to the Clinic rather than award him the traditional punishment of a thief.

Nobody would deny that a good deal of juvenile delinquency is conditioned by unfavourable environment or psychological maladjustment, and nobody in his senses would wish to return to nineteenth century methods of dealing with the delinquents. Unfortunately we seem to be in some danger of supposing that all juvenile delinquency, and adult delinquency as well for that matter, is due to these factors and to them only. There are books on the subject which implicitly or explicitly deny altogether the factor of moral responsibility and indeed go so far as to disguise the ugly phenomenon of crime under some polite euphemism such as 'social deviation'. Yet a study of the case-histories of juvenile delinquents will produce cases which simply cannot be explained by environment alone—boys and girls who in spite of all advantages of home and environment and in spite of all efforts to help them, show a terrifying determination in wrong-doing. ('Maladjustment' is left out of this argument, since that conveniently elastic word can be made to embrace all manner of abnormal behaviour.) Why, therefore, are we in danger of treating all alike as victims of circumstance?

Two aspects of contemporary thought are, I believe, responsible for the modern approach to delinquency, and both spring from a materialist outlook on life. The first is the rapid disappearance of our sense of sin, a concept which now seems to be largely obsolete except among Catholics and other Christians. It is, of course, a natural outcome of the materialist view of life, for in a purely material universe there is no place for the Devil and his works. Without the Devil, however, it is not always easy to explain the murkier by-ways of human conduct. Seventeenth-century witch-hunters had at least a healthy appreciation of the powers of evil, even if in their zeal against the Devil they were led into monstrous perversions of justice, but twentieth-century criminologists of a

materialist turn of mind may also pervert justice by treating all crime as the outcome of external forces. Such a perversion is unfair both to the society which suffers from the activities of criminals, and to man himself, who is degraded from his dignity as a being possessed of free-will to the lowly status of a mere plaything of circumstance. I should not attempt to deny that unfavourable economic and social conditions and psychological disorders are important contributory causes of crime, and that a good deal of crime can be and has been prevented by elimination or mitigation of these factors, but if man has free-will then the ultimate determinant of his conduct is the exercise of that will. A penal system which tries to ignore free-will rests upon false assumptions.

The other aspect of contemporary thought reflected in the modern approach to juvenile delinquency is dislike of unpleasantness, a desire to explain away unpleasant things or at least disguise them under pretty names. This again springs from a materialist conception of the universe. If there is no life beyond the earthly one, then men can hardly be blamed for trying to make this life as pleasant as possible by covering up its unpleasant features. Crime is a very unpleasant feature, but it can be made somewhat less offensive if we disguise it as the outcome of certain economic and psychological forces or even if we call it by another name. Murder, for instance, can be made to appear much less shocking if we can persuade ourselves that the murderer really has no control over his conduct, and the materialist humanitarian can indeed make some forms of murder, as we have seen, seem positively praiseworthy under the names of 'euthanasia' or 'legalised abortion'. To some people it seems almost incredible that children should deliberately commit crimes, although the Catholic knows that if there can be child saints there can equally well be child sinners. After all, if St Thérèse could at a tender age resolve to be a Carmelite, it is equally probable that Tommy Smith can resolve to be a gangster. Certain forms of punishment or, for that matter, the idea of punishment at all, are also unpleasant to contemplate, therefore it may be argued that they should be abolished in order to lessen the general unpleasantness of the world. It is indeed ironic that the same human race which did not hesitate to scourge and crucify the Son of God should now be squeamish about flogging or hanging hardened criminals.

This desire to avert the eyes from unpleasantness can also be seen at work in the changes we have made in the names of institutions for delinquents. We no longer confine young offenders in 'reformatories' or budding prostitutes in 'penitentiaries', but com-

mit them to 'Approved Schools' or 'training homes' respectively. Insofar as the former names had come to be associated with the worst features of the old-fashioned type of institution, they are perhaps better abandoned, but it would be a bad day for us if we were to abandon the idea of reform and penitence along with the names. According to the materialist point of view, of course, there is no place for these ideas in penology. What is the use of trying to 'reform' a boy whose delinquency is the inevitable outcome of his environment, or expecting 'penitence' of a girl whose street-walking is the result of psychological abnormality?

I am not suggesting that all, or even the majority, of modern exponents of penology are materialists. Most of them are well-intentioned men and women seriously troubled by the social evil of juvenile delinquency. They do not always seem to realise, however, that their problem cannot be tackled by trying to find comfortable explanations of it. Juvenile delinquency is at bottom sin, and only by admitting this can we come to a sane approach to it. It may be unpleasant to think of children sinning, and equally unpleasant to use the birch on them, but if we spare the rod let us be quite sure that we are doing so because we regard it as an ineffective remedy for sin, and not merely because of its unpleasantness.

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So we have two approaches to social work. On the one hand the Catholic, looking after the material welfare of mankind but always subordinating it to man's true end, and on the other the State or secular approach, looking exclusively to temporal welfare and hence falling into the dangers and delusions already discussed. It would be idle to pretend in these days of ever-increasing State activity that we have much hope of returning to a Christian, let alone a Catholic approach. The best remedy at the moment is perhaps for more and more Catholics to devote themselves to social work, even if in State employ, and to work on Catholic principles to the utmost possible within the bounds of their employment.

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