

MATERIAL THOUGHTS

There is a material side to Christianity as well as the spiritual foundation; and it is on the material side, as it affects our daily lives and our national interests, that my thoughts dwell at the moment. Where does Christianity touch the major problems of to-day: bad trade, unemployment, poverty, lack of general interest in public affairs, wide-spread corruption, indifference to crime and dishonesty, and finally slaughter—I might almost call it human sacrifice—on our high roads? I have no ready made cure to offer for our troubles; nor can I believe that there is a simple and easy path leading out of the complicated tangle of difficulties surrounding the individual and the nation. I am not prepared to join with those who lightly attribute all evils to the war; for it seems to me that the war, with its call for self-denial and a realization of the existence of man's duty as well as man's rights, nearly saved the nation from spiritual decadence. I do believe that there is a way out of our troubles, and that the key to all the problems is to be found in discipline.

A nation without religion is a nation without backbone; for sincere religious belief is the only form of discipline by which human nature can be trained to healthy growth. The law, to a certain extent, protects the weak man from his strong neighbour (though this does not apply to-day in the realm of finance): religion protects the weak man and the strong man alike from himself. So difficult are our personal problems; so powerful is public opinion on minor subjects relating to appearances, social status, *et hoc genus omne*, that special power is needed by man to keep him daily from thoughts and actions which, though not necessarily sin in themselves, are tainted by meanness and dishonesty. There is a saying in the Talmud to the effect that if a man commits a sin twice he will cease to regard it as evil doing. Religion is the only safeguard given to man as protection against the repetition of sin or unworthy thought and action of the kind not likely to be discovered. And the habit of tolerating what need not be disclosed has

BLACKFRIARS

led inevitably to the toleration of proven malfeasance. In fact the divorce of religion from our lives has left us as a nation without a moral standard.

It is considered to be bad taste, no doubt, to speak or write plainly on unpleasant topics; but some day the truth must be faced unless, as a nation, we are to go from bad to worse; so let us be frank and endure the stigma of bad taste. We are suffering to-day, in the first place, from wide-spread corruption. Great financiers gamble daily on our trade, our food supply and our credit; and they do this with money they do not possess: when they fail to win bankruptcy follows. This form of immorality is now depressing trade and keeping up the terribly high percentage of unemployment. Money remains locked up in the banks because people dare not invest in productive enterprise, for no honest industrial venture is to-day safe from the gamblers of the financial world. Trade has to bear the burden of dishonest gambling—dishonest because it is carried on by some men with other people's money, and by other men who know they cannot pay when they lose. Thus in addition to the immorality of this business of gambling with other people's securities, there is the frank dishonesty of the nature of the gamble. The crime and its consequences rouse no indignation in a public mind grown lethargic for want of the moral support of true religion; so trade languishes, and a vast army of unemployed men and women eke out a bare existence on the dole and on 'charity.' Similar gambling in food supplies places a tax on the consumer far heavier than any Government tax imposed before the repeal of the corn laws; and this gamble also is carried on with cynical disregard of honour by men willing to declare themselves bankrupt at any convenient moment, knowing full well that bankruptcy is nearly as fashionable as divorce, and equally free from stigma in public opinion. Having no faith, the public can but shrug its shoulders and submit to a tyranny of rogues. Our credit as a nation is high: our credit as traders no longer exists,

MATERIAL THOUGHTS

The slaughter of something near two hundred people a week on our highways, and the injury and crippling of many more, arouses no public feeling of horror and indignation, and yet it is largely a human sacrifice made to vanity and insolence and selfishness. Some men feel so important that they must hurry to save time which is money to them; and they hurry at the risk and too often at the cost of other people's lives. Others deliberately bully on the road, taking the attitude that they will not give way, that they will not be cautious on dangerous curves and at cross-roads. And many enjoy speed and so enjoy themselves, often with little skill, at the cost of—human sacrifice. This rank immorality is tolerated almost without protest, for without religion there can be no standard of right and wrong, and the only standard left for man may be put in the American phrase: 'what he can get away with.'

Sentiment has become as much *déclassé* as have expressions of patriotism; and yet sentiment and the genuine love of right and abhorrence of wrong doing are as deeply seated in the hearts of the people as they were fifty years ago. Proof of this is to be found in the Cinema. The favourite screen plays are nothing more or less than the old Adelphi melodrama in modern dressing: villany must be punished and right must triumph in the end. How is it, then, that a whole population has been coerced into assuming a veneer of cynicism and impiety which fits so uncomfortably on natures really homely and honest? My theory is that we are suffering as a nation from the teaching of the ignorant.

It is a curious paradox that with the spread of education there has come a diminution of learning. Scholarship finds no market. Teachers who have paddled in some of the shallower pools of biology feel that they have plumbed the depths of universal knowledge, and thenceforth strut and rant on daïs and platform and shriek in staccato sentences on the printed page. The dissecting knife has laid bare the mechanism of the human body (but not the mystery of life and death), and he who has learned to read may borrow some of the knowledge acquired by others

and give his own interpretation to so much of this as he can understand. Vanity in the possession of a certificate from a training college or of a pass degree is often a stepping stone to a platform of ignorance from which ill-conceived theories, possibly based on a few items of genuine knowledge, are thundered forth as proven science.

Unfortunately, this tendency is invading the higher mental grades. Psychology is a science with tremendous possibilities at present in the stage of extreme infancy; it can scarcely claim to have cut its first tooth. Yet dignified seats of learning, not content to regard it as a fruitful subject for research, have established Chairs for the teaching of psychology as a science. Young people go forth from these universities to put into dangerous practice theories which for them bear the hallmark of science. Even in the world of physics the accepted fact of to-day becomes a jest to-morrow; so it would seem that the study of the human mind would inspire the greatest caution in any man possessed of a sense of responsibility. But startling theories are more easily vended than dry facts, and the sense of responsibility has no market value; so it is that the teachers of the nation can leave religious thought to die of inanition while holding the public attention by the glitter of something new. Teachers armed with a smattering of learning that has not reached the status of knowledge, and an armful of theories couched in phrases which give to assertion the face value of axiom, so overvalue their mental attainments that they deny the existence of all they fail to understand. They can conceive of nothing mightier than themselves; and so the knowledge of God and of the eternal verities is lost to these blind leaders of the blind.

What makes the people shy at Christianity? Is it that the ideal set is so terrible in its perfection? It may be that religion is unpopular because the sincere Christian can never be really at peace with himself; he can never feel really self-satisfied. Christianity demands so much more than mere protestations of faith or even compliance with the law: it imposes honourable dealing, consideration for others, generosity in thought and action, and self-sacrifice,

MATERIAL THOUGHTS

or at least a measure of self-denial, for the common good. It is noteworthy that Christ Our Lord was less disturbed by evidence of the common sins than he was by mean actions. He rebuked sin: 'Go and sin no more,' was all He said to the woman whom he had saved from the death penalty; but the money changers roused his ire. They were law-abiding citizens pursuing their trade, not on holy ground, but in the courtyard of the Temple where they were conducting the legitimate and useful business of selling beasts and birds for sacrifice, and changing foreign money. But Christ knew that they were taking advantage of the ignorance and simplicity of visitors from the country to cheat them, so he overturned their tables and drove them from the Temple. This is where Christianity clashes with commerce.

Christianity permits no laxity of conduct, and as man is prone to err, the Christian, however brave a front he may show to the world, has daily to settle accounts with himself—a process calculated to wound his vanity. Work and pleasure, hurry and bustle provide an anodyne for thought, and he who thrives can drug conscience by flinging a sop to Cerberus in the form of a donation to a hospital or endowment to education; and the applause with which his action is greeted may easily raise him in his own esteem. So religion slides to the background, and with the consequent loss of spiritual strength comes loss of those forces which gave material well-being. The clever generation which knows all that can be learnt gives want in the midst of over-production, bankruptcy, failure and stagnant business with wealth piled up in the banks for lack of honest opportunity; disregard of human life for fear of offending plutocracy in limousines and democracy in motor coaches and on lorries; a Laodicean attitude towards corruption in high places; philosophic patience in the suffering of others. This wallowing in the mire is alien to the great soul of the nation which seems to be bound down for the time being by a false shyness of spiritual yearning, and held in bondage by people educated by the illiterate and led by the echo of their own voices.

VINCENT BASEVI.