

Social Ethics and its Orthodoxy

The acceleration of interest in the science of society which marked the second half of the nineteenth century would scarcely fail to have its repercussions in theological education. In addition to a growing social interest in the conventional theological disciplines, there appeared new departments and professorships in Social Ethics. Today Social Ethics has a firm place among the disciplines for the training of the minister. It is, therefore, of great concern to the Church that the studies undertaken in this division shall be of such a nature as to contribute positively to the preparation of the candidate.

In connection with the development of this branch of theological training, it is interesting to note that it has already developed an orthodoxy of its own. This is the more remarkable in the light of two facts: first, the relative newness of the discipline of Social Ethics; and second, the precarious state of contemporary social and economic conditions. A canvass of the writings of the outstanding professors of Social Ethics reveals that the new division of socio-theological studies is fairly characterized as of the political and social left. To be orthodox in this field demands that the writer or instructor be opposed to the present capitalistic order particularly as it exists in the United States.

This editorial proposes to examine several of the premises which the current Social Ethics discipline assumes, with a view to determining whether or not they are as sound as their proponents think them to be. Some of them seem, on the surface at least, to be highly debatable, and possibly open to the charge of being naïve.

Basic to the orthodoxy of modern Social Ethics is the view that our present economic system is inescapably geared to an unworkable nationalism, which is in turn the cause of wars. At the same time, our brethren of the left inveigh against cartel

agreements which are obviously international in character, and which frequently produce such anomalous results in wars between states. It is assumed, further, that national rivalries are *purely* economic things. Those who thus declare seem to this writer to oversimplify the problem. While economic considerations are frequently to blame in large part for wars, it is hardly safe to neglect the other factors involved, such as love of location, patriotic sensitiveness, cultural inferiority complexes, and the like. In any case, history hardly clears those nations in which the political order overshadows the economic order of guilt for precipitating wars.

The second assumption which seems to demand attention is, that those nations which have adopted strong governmental controls over economic processes have done so purely as a result of the rational conclusions of their enlightened citizens that a more free economy is wrong. Now, there are some nations, such as the Scandinavian countries, which have made voluntary moves in the direction of state socialism. None will deny, however, that these peoples, numerically and geographically small and surrounded by powerful states whose economies they fear, have been influenced by certain practical considerations which would hardly have issued from a simple belief in the fundamental unsoundness of capitalism.

More significant still is the blunt fact that several nations now experimenting with state socialism, notably Great Britain, are doing so because their physical resources have been depleted beyond the degree from which recovery was possible from private enterprise. In other words, only the State is now an instrument sufficiently powerful to undertake the gigantic problem of reconstruction. One gets the feeling that these states have adopted Socialism as a compromise meas-

ure, to secure them, if possible, against total chaos and the Communism which inevitably breeds in economic ferment. Few indeed are the instances of major powers which have moved from free enterprise to state control over the economic system under any other circumstances except those of disaster.

A third assumption is, that these nations which are now moving toward the left have at long last embarked upon a course which will end the absurd and destructive fluctuations to which the capitalist economy is subject. It is true that the Soviet Union has put an end to some economic problems: the machinery for this purpose operated recently in the shuffle of currency there. One is tempted to wonder how many professors of Social Ethics would wish to have the endowments upon which their salaries depend subject to such currency manipulations as occurred this past fall in the Soviet Union. And to declare at this stage any degree of success for Great Britain in this respect requires either vast predictive power or a blind faith in a given type of economic arrangement. Possibly Britain will in time, with the aid of capital furnished under the Marshall Plan, restore some semblance of economic stability.

We are asked, however, to believe that the United States is decades behind the times in continuing with her relatively free economy, while the other parts of the world move boldly ahead toward rational societies in which depressions remain only in the memories of the aged. It is true, of course, that our economic system has its evil spots; certainly no one of understanding would pretend that it is as efficient as it might be. At the same time, common sense demands some reserve in the expression of optimism with respect to the success of newer movements.

A fourth presupposition which seems debatable is, that the strong state need not be an arbitrary state. We are assured that fear of the strong state grows out of a basic mistrust of human nature—a lack of confidence in the essential goodness of man. Against this, we are bidden to believe that totalitarianism is but an accidental per-

version of statecraft, due to (temporary) power distortions growing out of the loss of individuality in a previous capitalistic society.¹ In other words, the strong state is bad only as a result of a hold-over from the capitalistic order. If this be true, it follows as a matter of course that history can teach us nothing about the ultimate destiny of the strong state.

Social theologians of the orthodox school insist that we are setting up a false anti-thesis when we set free-enterprise against collectivism. They bid us cease to emphasize the element of power in the corporate life, and to place additional confidence in the essential altruism in human nature which underlies the social tendencies in mankind. An appeal to history is far from reassuring at this point: few indeed have been the statesmen who were not corrupted by power to the abuse of power. The grim record of the past bears witness to the persistence of the egoistic impulse, and of the tendency of strength to beget lust for power. Moreover, the strong and efficient state demands long tenure of office for its leadership. It is far from reassuring to study the effects of perpetuity in office upon state officials. Seldom have strong states administered by 'career' men exerted power in the direction of the freedom of the common man.

It is a commonplace to say that coercion plays a large part in human corporate life. The genius of democracy is, that its coercions are dispersed: in addition to legal coercion there are hidden coercions from non-state sources. A case might conceivably be made for the view that the best safeguard against state tyranny is to be found in a system of dispersed coercions, with their inevitable checks upon each other.

It goes without saying that there is no simple *either . . . or* between a completely free economy and an economy administered by the strong state. The United States of America possesses government 'services', such as the Post Office, the I. C. C., etc.

¹ Walter G. Muelder, "Concerning Power in the State" in *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. V, Spring, 1947, p. 3.

Moreover, it has made an experiment in state-industry in T. V. A. Possibly some enterprises are too large for private capital and must be undertaken, if at all, by governmental agencies. To date, however, these have been kept in check by parallel business structures, privately owned.

A fifth assumption to which attention needs to be drawn is that state capitalism will avoid the abuses to which private capitalism is subject. It goes without saying that economic liberals have, in general, seen that the structure of our world demands vast pools of economic power—that no spindle-and-loom economy can be expected to survive. This is a tacit admission that it is not capitalism which is wrong, but capitalism in non-public hands. One is tempted to inquire what alchemy will render this instrument evil on one hand and good on the other. The ideal answer would speak of the state as acting in the 'public good' and of private capitalism as acting solely in the interest of the few. This rests again upon the assumption that the strong state is more ethical than a private economy balanced by a state which acts as an umpire rather than a board of directors.

It seems to the writer that the whole case of the political left depends upon the emergence, under conditions of the strong state, of administrators of such idealism and altruism as will cause them to subordinate private to public interest. Some will doubtless inquire concerning the probability of the production of such a type of altruism, and concerning what magic in the planned economy will bring forth such a rare product. The modern social anthropologist may reply, that a right view of the state as a moral reality will clarify the problem, and that there is need for a deeper realization of the teleological working of the *social real* in its members—when they are freed from the inhibiting distortions which have hitherto worked through the economy of private capital.

A sixth assumption is expressed in terms of the bearing of the science of nuclear fission upon statecraft. Inasmuch as the discovery of methods for the release of atomic energy opens a source of power

too great to be entrusted to private hands, it must be in the trusteeship of the state. This is by no means a frivolous argument. While it is too early to assess the overall significance of atomic power for the civilization of the decades to come, it seems within the range of the possible that governments will perforce be engaged in the business of exploiting and allocating atomic energy—provided they can handle their differences with other governments through diplomatic channels. At the same time, we are well advised to avoid the customary hysteria with respect to this subject, and to remember that other factors may operate to alter the entire picture before peacetime exploitation of atomic fission is feasible.

A seventh assumption is that public ownership of key industries is compatible with private ownership of a significant number of others. Those who assert this take for granted that the state will be content to be just so strong and no stronger, and that it will need to regulate only certain categories of business—say natural resources, or public utilities. There is something to be said, however, for the view that competitive factors will compel nothing less than all-out socialism. Private business can hardly compete with public business, so long as deficits in the latter can be cared for out of the public treasury. The writer is aware of the complicated nature of the problem of economic risks, and their relation to profit margin.² Doubtless this factor has been greatly overworked as a justification of profit as a factor in the economy of a people. At the same time, it seems inescapable that state capitalism must swallow more and more of the economy of the people in whose name it works.

The eighth and last assumption to which attention is turned is that private capitalism represents a severance of economics from Christian morality, and that state capitalism will reunite the two. This argument is frequently based upon a wholesale denunciation of the 'profit motive'. Now, few will doubt that our economic life is far

² Harry F. Ward, *Our Economic Morality*, pp. 146ff.

from an adequate expression of the ethic of the Gospel, and that the profit motive is capable of abuses. What is debatable is, whether private capitalism is *per se* anti-christian while collectivism is essentially Christian. May it not be that our economic life, along with many other phases, has never been christianized? It is far from assured that a change in the holder will effect *simpliciter* an alteration in the ethics of the system.

There have never been wanting persons to contend that *their* system reflected Jesus' ideals: the dialectical theologians have seen the absurdity of this, and have rightly protested the tendency to 'domesticate Christ'. So far as the clear teaching of the Gospels is concerned, Jesus set forth no economic system, but only laid down certain principles. He insisted that the abundance of a man's life does not consist in the things which he possesses. This maxim, taken seriously, would certainly have a profound effect upon the business practices of men.

It seems to this writer that more attention is due to certain of our Lord's teachings than has been given them, notably the parables dealing with stewardship. The Parable of the Talents, for instance, seems to imply nothing if not that there are differences in endowments, and that diligence is demanded and rewarded. Probably some will argue that we unduly restrict the significance of this parable to apply it to matters of an economic nature. Yet in its most direct sense it deals with endowments and returns, and reveals attitudes toward such matters. The judgment of the writer is, that if we seek a justification for the abolition of the profit motive in the New Testament, we must ground it elsewhere than in this parable. Those who take seriously the words of our Lord in this matter will hardly accept at face value the categorical denunciations of the profit motive which have become conventional to liberal social anthropologists. To question some of the applications of the profit principle is certainly legitimate. To treat it as social enemy number one is, however, naïve.

Othodox social ethics has for its central

assertion the claim that the state must be strong, and that the political power must take precedence over the economic order.³ In other words, the ultimate authority must be political in character. Subordinate concentrations of power can be permitted only if they be "ethical"—that is, if they be cultural or fraternal, but *not* economic. (This assumes, rather naïvely, that the economic order is *per se* unethical or at least non-ethical.) How the strong state proposes to build in the mind of the people at the grass-roots an idealism which such a plan requires has not been explained. More important still, of what value would dispersed non-economic organizations be if they were dependent for their bread and butter upon the political power? Possibly they would serve a useful purpose as sounding-boards for the political order.

Against the doctrine of the so-called strong state, we would urge the following objections. First, we must reject the state realism for which Plato is famous: the view of the state as an entity which is *per se* ethical. Against this we must affirm our belief in the intrinsically dangerous character of the state in which the political order is independent of, and supreme over, the economic order, and in which it is unchecked by strong, if disguised, forms of counter-coercion. This is not a demand for weak or inefficient government, but for a government in which the political sovereignty is held in check by the delicate balance of the other forces in human life.

The state is thus viewed as a framework within which the common life must be lived. This does not minimize the task of the state to secure the common good. It does, however, vigorously oppose the omni-responsible state, with its paternalistic 'cradle-to-grave' guarantees. The demand for such a state represents the 'failure of nerve' of democracy, and the willingness to sacrifice liberty for security. We must remember that a democratic society involves hazards for the social units; we believe that many of such hazards can be removed only at the price of the loss of the basic

³ Muelder, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

liberties which we cherish.

Against the charge that the fear of the strong state grows out of misanthropy, we urge that our insistence upon a state in which the political power is counter-checked by economic and social power-dispersions is based upon a wholesome realism with respect to human nature. At this point, we affirm our belief that the political left is operating upon an assumption of the theological left which is naïve—namely, that of the fundamental goodness of man. At this point liberals will do well to heed the warning bell of the crisis theologians as they insist that sin has penetrated the very core of human nature—an insight which is by no means new to historic Christianity. Derived from this ingrained sinfulness are the impulses of will-to-power and will-to-acquire which survive the pious counsels of liberal statecraft, and which have historically left no middle ground between the state of dispersed controls and the totalitarian state.

It is difficult to avoid the observation, also, that the tendency of the orthodox school of social ethics to espouse the cause of the political left grows out of a 'band-wagon' mentality—a desire to ride the crest of the wave. Possibly the latent reasoning is as follows: the trend is toward the left, therefore let us seek to harness the trend. This may be good expediency: it is hardly good Christianity. At this point let it be said that we hold no form of political and economic system to be essential to the proclamation of the Christian message. Christianity was born in an era of dictatorship, and has survived the rise and fall of tyrants. Our concern here is for the form of statecraft which seems most compatible with the Christian message.

Again, leftist social ethics has a blind spot for the ability of the capitalistic order to correct its own economic abuses. One gets the impression that its proponents are living in the days of Ida M. Tarbell, while

capitalism has moved far ahead in humanizing itself. It is true that there is yet much land to be possessed; there is no reason that in a flexible democracy, such abuses as can be eliminated should not be progressively left behind. To say the least, it scarcely makes sense to set for purposes of comparison the worst features of capitalism in practice against the paper ideal of the socialist state.

Of the objections which we have raised to the strong state proposed by orthodox social ethics, the sum is this: such a state as this demands such a subordination of all other forms of power to the political power that there is no stopping-place short of the regimented state. The verdict of history is that such statecraft tends to inbreed itself, and to lead to tyranny. There is no historic precedent for the so-called ethical state demanded by the 'progressive' left. And to blame the development of totalitarianism upon the prior influence of the capitalistic order, and to brand fear of the state as misanthropy, is in our judgment to employ weasel words.

Finally, we are among those who, while deploring the lack of equity and efficiency under current democracy, must affirm our preference for free institutions, maintained through the balance of private against public power—even though these freedoms be secured at the price of some inefficiency and duplication of effort. It is far from certain that these abuses can be eliminated in the leftist state. We believe, further, that there is precedent which warrants the belief that a democratic society, with private capitalism moderately regulated by law, affords a framework within which economic and social abuses can be progressively eliminated. We believe that such a society accords best with a realistic view of human nature, and that it will in the long run afford the best set of factors within which human freedom can be main-

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