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CRITICISMS AND QUERIES

IS THERE A RELIGIOUS BREAKDOWN OF THE MINISTRY?

My colleague has given us a trenchant article, and I find myself in hearty accord with his main contention that "the minister is a guide and inspirer of social ends and motives," and that there is lamentable ignorance among the members of our churches of what are the Christian social ends to be sought, and what are the Christian motives by which they can be attained. The most serious weakness of current preaching is that it so seldom enlightens. It exhorts too much and informs too little. One rarely learns anything from the average sermon. Preachers take for granted that their congregations know what the Christian life is, and expend their energies in urging them to it. But the Christian life is, as its earliest devotees termed it, "the Way"; and the road enters a different stretch of country with each generation, and must be laid out for them. It is always "towards Christ," but the Christian ideal has to be interpreted afresh in view of the contemporary situation. In 1620 it meant for our Pilgrim Fathers voluntary exile from their loved native land and the attempt to set up in a new world the divine commonwealth which they found planned in the Bible. In 1920 it has meant to many of us the gathering of the nations, with their industries and commerce, their homes and schools, their whole life, into a world-wide commonwealth inspired and governed by the spirit of Christ.

It is the interpretation of what this reign of God involves which is too rarely given. What are the ends a Christian citizen must seek for his country and his community? What are his duties in the industrial world as a producer, a consumer, an owner, an investor, an employer, or an employee? These and kindred questions must be dealt with explicitly in the light of the gospel of Christ. And because they are not thus handled there is much vagueness as to what is meant by "accepting Christ," and the members of our churches are hazy as to the purpose to which they have committed themselves. Dr. Coe correctly stresses the supreme need of a teaching ministry, and of instruction along the particular lines which have to do with our economic and political life. No church is worthily fulfilling its duty in supplying inspirations and guidance to citizens of a democracy which fails to render this informing service.

There are minor points in Professor Coe's article which raise some questions. Is his title aptly chosen? Does not a "breakdown" imply a previous healthy functioning of the ministry? and has there been any time in the recent history of the Christian church when its ministers gave an adequate treatment of "social ends and motives"? Was not the lack of such teaching throughout Christendom a primary cause of the recent war, and of our inability to arrive at a satisfactory peace? Is not such an article as Dr. Coe's a wholesome indication that our generation is turning its attention to the development of this sorely neglected and urgently needed element of the Christian message?

Again, is the "breakdown" (for which I should prefer to use the word "weakness") as Dr. Coe analyzes it "religious"? Is not his diagnosis of the situation ethical rather than religious? Christianity is an ethical religion, and ethics and religion are inseparable in it; but "social ends and motives" as he has treated them seem to lie within its sphere as ethic.

And this brings me to the main addition I should like to make to the discussion which he has so admirably opened. In my judgment there is a serious "religious" weakness in many ministries, and it is sometimes apparent in those which devote much preaching to "social ends and motives." The Christian life is a fellowship through Christ with God and with his children in his purpose. Dr. Coe emphasizes the necessity of making clear the purpose. I should like to add also the necessity of teaching Christians to realize their fellowship with the living God in that purpose. Every pastor is aware how many of those reared in our Sunday schools and fairly frequent in their attendance at church services do not know how to find reinforcements and guidance in God. Christianity is both a faith and a purpose, and without the faith the purpose can never be bravely and hopefully enterprised. "The people that know their God shall be strong and do exploits." Here again what is needed is a teaching ministry. It is not enough to harp constantly on the necessity of communion with God, but to show men who he is, and what are his relations with them and with the world. This is the preaching of Christian doctrine, as Dr. Coe commends the preaching of Christian social ethics. We have to teach men what may be theirs in the life with God through Christ, that they may be induced to explore for themselves and make their own enriching discoveries.

A democracy makes a huge demand upon faith—faith in the capacities of plain men and women, faith in the power of ideals, faith in the universe as friendly to a fraternal commonwealth. The Christian conception of God supplies this faith—faith in him as incarnate in a

plain Man, faith in him as the inspiring Spirit of Christlike ideals, faith in him as Lord of heaven and earth. One is often disheartened to observe how many Christians lack a thoroughly Christian conception of God. When once they possess that, they can be shown "social ends" that he and we can share, and "social motives" in which we may expect his empowering Spirit.

I agree with my colleague that much of the preaching during the war was very remotely Christian. Many of the utterances were B.C. rather than A.D. I am not prepared, however, to agree wholly that "the clergy did count, and that splendidly, but it was not their religion that counted." When the clergy counted splendidly, it was not when they voiced on Sunday the same sentiments with which the press was filled throughout the week; but when they faced the ethical perplexities in which Christian consciences found themselves, pointed out that war was not and could never be called a Christian method of solving an international problem, but might under the circumstances be the less un-Christian method of ending an intolerable situation. On the one hand the minister had to preserve Christian standards when the psychology of war was destroying them; and on the other hand he had to show his people the course which lay in the Christian direction through circumstances in which an ideally Christian method was not one of the alternatives presented. And further he could assure them that in moving in the Christian direction, they could rely on the assistance of the God of righteousness. Where such discriminating preaching was given, and it was given by many pulpits, it was surely the religion of the clergy that counted. They linked the social end of the nation with the will of the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

But my criticism of an occasional phrase in my colleague's article only serves to show my agreement with his main aim. He is pleading for an interpreting type of preaching and teaching which makes clear for what followers of Jesus must stand in the situations in which we find ourselves as kinsmen, citizens, workers, and churchmen. Only where such guidance is given, are Christians who "understand what the will of the Lord is" likely to be produced. The failure of the churches to produce enough Christians of this intelligent variety is probably their most serious weakness. May Dr. Coe's plea send us preachers to our proper task with renewed resolve to "teach every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ."

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Professor Coe's vigorous discussion of the spiritual leadership of the ministry today will induce much soul-searching on the part of men eager to be true to their responsibilities. Stimulating as his discussion is, I question whether it has really touched the kernel of the matter.

In the development of Christianity we are in the process of transition from a religion of authority to a more democratic type of religion. On the basis of an authoritative system the leadership of the minister is a relatively simple matter. Without regard to his own personal qualifications he may become the mouthpiece of an imposing divine authority. Professor Coe recognizes this type of leadership in his footnote on page 23, when he says:

Every intelligent Catholic has definite and correct ideas as to what his priest stands for, and of the meaning of membership in the Catholic church. This gives the advantage of a unified and determined front, indeed, but the ulterior problem here concerns the ends prescribed by the hierarchy to the faithful. To save one's own soul by obeying an autocratic spiritual authority, and to contribute to the final and complete triumph of this autocracy—this conception of spiritual life, duty, and destiny makes the problem of the priest too simple. He can fulfill his essential functions by performing certain doctrines and duties already strictly formulated. The problem of the Protestant minister goes many fathoms deeper than this.

The thing which interested me in this footnote was Professor Coe's recognition of the fact that such kind of leadership is impossible for a Protestant minister. Indeed by implication such leadership is regarded as mechanical rather than spiritual.

And yet is the article not really an arraignment of Protestant ministers because they are unable authoritatively to define what is and what is not Christian? To be sure, Professor Coe insists that it is unjust "to demand of ministers such fabulous wisdom as to be able to tell just what to do in every troublesome situation." His duty is rather to discern ends which are worthy and to judge what kind of social organizations will promote these ends. And yet Professor Coe's culminating demand is to know whether "a system in which one works for wages, and another for profits, is fundamentally Christian, anti-Christian, or neutral."

Now if the minister were in a position to quote the word of God on the subject, he could speak with the old-fashioned authority. But, again, this would be, by Professor Coe's own standard, mere mechanical dogmatism. The only alternative left, then, seems to be the possession of such knowledge concerning the intricacies of the wage system as will give one a right to pass judgment. But is any living man competent

for this task? Have the implications of the wage system been sufficiently analyzed and considered to furnish the data for any final judgment in so complicated a matter?

Those who have studied religion from the point of view of history and of psychology are perfectly familiar with the thesis that religious values are worked out with very much of the trial-and-error method in the process of social development. It took three centuries for religious leaders in the ancient church to determine just what was the "Christian view" of the nature of Jesus. How long did it take the church to ascertain whether slavery was or was not in accordance with Christian ideals? The fact is that by all the laws of social psychology the real leader must be a member of a democratic society working out problems along with other people rather than an oracle capable of deciding questions by means unknown to people as a whole. If it be true that during the war the Christian pulpit had no distinctively Christian message (a thesis open to serious question), may not the explanation be that the influence of centuries of Christian idealism made possible under the stress of a great emotion a popular *Christian* appraisal of the disturbed situation in which humanity found itself? What finer expression of genuinely Christian ideals could be found than in the extraordinary sense of consecration to the cause of *human* values which pervaded our country?

Instead of speaking of the religious breakdown of the ministry, would it not be truer to speak of the beginnings of a new kind of religious leadership? For better or for worse, the type of Christianity in which Professor Coe believes has turned its back upon the conception that solutions for our problems can be brought *to* us, as the Catholic church furnishes programs for its members. Solutions must be worked out by social co-operation. As we all struggle together for better light, gifted individuals here and there will appear who with peculiar insight voice ideals and values toward which we all are groping. But in a democratic society, it is not to be expected that these leaders will all come from the ministry. Indeed, it would seem that a peculiar responsibility for developing such leadership in relation to problems of industry rests upon those who know industry best. President Wilson was the real prophet of a humane internationalism. And when thousands of pulpits reinforced and interpreted his prophetic words, was the leadership of the pulpit any less religious because the ministry did not *originate* the message?

It is somewhat surprising that Professor Coe, who knows so well that religious values are socially created, should perpetuate in his

article the picture of a "Christianity" so distinct from the social development of which it is a part that it can furnish authoritative judgments; and to demand of the ministry a quasi-official ability to declare what is "Christian," as if complicated questions could thereby be settled. The "religious breakdown" of that kind of pretension is inevitable in a democratic society. It scarcely deserves the attention which Professor Coe bestows upon it. Our present understanding of the social character of religion reveals the positive value of a ministry which struggles for light in a struggling world, and which serves to give publicity and religious carrying power to the messages of hope and courage and determination which, of course, are uttered by any- and everyone in a democratic society.

Let me ask again, are we not really facing the beginnings of a new kind of religious ministry? And its day will be hastened if we frankly accept the "breakdown" of an impossible pretension instead of suggesting that we ought by some frantic means to reinstate it.

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It seems to me that Professor Coe considers too lightly the work which he admits the church is doing in the realm of individual upbuilding. At the center of all moral and religious life must of course stand the will to do right. The church seems to me to be doing much more in arousing and strengthening that central purpose to do right than we sometimes realize. I am well aware of the ignorance—on the part of young people everywhere—revealed by the answers to questions asked of soldiers during the war. For four months I myself worked among soldiers. It is true that very few could make any sort of statement as to what the purpose of the church is, or should be. But it is also true that almost all would quickly condemn meanness or smallness on the part of the professed Christian. "He's a pretty sort of Christian, isn't he?" would be the almost invariable comment on the professed Christian who fell short. And by the time the one voicing such a criticism had finished it would be tolerably clear that he expected professed Christians to try to act like Christ. That general expectation the church has, I think, sunk deeply into the common consciousness. Moral and spiritual progress consists, it is obvious, in informing more and more of our acts with the moral spirit and in bringing more and more persons within the sphere of Christly contact. The sad fact is that the central will to do right—as demanded by the church—reaches out to such a limited circumference.

There is a prophetic accent in Professor Coe's word as he rebukes us all for the breakdown of the church in the presence of some moral issues growing out of the war, and in the presence of the need of the reorganization of society and industry on a more Christian basis. While I appreciate the moral fervor which prompts Dr. Coe to cry aloud and spare not I do not find it possible myself to get into quite such an attitude of condemnation. The trouble does not seem to me to be so much a moral fault as an intellectual shortcoming or inadequacy. Looking back now we can see that the world-war came as the logical culmination of the forces of economic imperialism, but not all of us saw this at the time. It was a great deal as if some supernal meddler had got hold of the levers of planets and had switched the earth out of its orbit in toward the sun with a change of time measures and of the seasonal processions and with a fearful increase of the heat of the climate. Everybody was at a loss, not so much morally as intellectually. Professor Coe has "come to" sooner than some of the rest of us.

The Professor puts very sharply the question as to whether a profit-seeking industrialism can be thought of as Christian. Here again I do not think the trouble with the ministry is so much a moral breakdown as an intellectual unpreparedness, for which the ministry is not altogether to blame. What Professor Coe really calls for is a message which challenges the entire attitude of practically all America toward industrial processes. I trust he will not become too impatient with me when I suggest that the mass of American preachers will have to get very considerable mental enlightenment before they catch the force of the Professor's questions, or discern the implications of them. It is sometimes said that the United States is backward in the popular understanding of the issues at stake in industrial and social conflict. If this is true we must remember that the generation in the United States which has just passed off the scene completed the conquest of the frontier under conditions which called for and gave free play to individual initiative, and which produced an individualist type of democracy. The present generation indeed faces a new task. A more socialized type of life—political, industrial, social—is the next requirement. But the whole atmosphere in which the present generation has been reared has made for individualism, and for the search for as much personal profit as can be found anywhere. The rule has been, "Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost." The fact that the devil has got not only the hindmost but more than he should of the foremost has not indeed disturbed us as it ought; but still the need is fundamentally for sound instruction from a changed point of view. The problem is that of the transformation of an entire social climate.

The hope in the situation comes from lifting the whole problem up to that emphasis on the human values which is essentially Christian. My official duties have made it necessary for me to travel about forty thousand miles a year for the past eight years, dealing almost wholly with ministers and their problems. As soon as a social question is seen by ministers to be clearly moral there need be no doubt as to the attitude of most of them. Professor Coe was good enough to refer to the Inter-Church Steel Strike Report. As chairman of the Commission that made that Report, may I state that the Commission expected severe cudgeling—and got it. It may be of interest to know that those who went out of their way to express encouragement to some of us on the Commission were mostly ministers—ministers, too, from the centers of the steel industry.

I have read everything that Professor Coe has ever published and am greatly in his debt. My interest in this present article is not merely in the fact that it is Professor Coe's but also in the fact that it comes out of a theological school. The theological schools more than any other agencies bear the responsibility for the change of emphasis which we need. How many of us who left theological school a quarter of a century ago had had any hard training in the social sciences? One of the good signs of the times is that an article like this has been written by a theological professor and that it has been published in a theological journal. Inasmuch as the problem is so largely intellectual it is necessary that intellectual agencies take the lead. Granting all that the article says about not expecting the minister to be an expert on programs of social reconstruction we all nevertheless expect to find such experts on theological faculties. There is a growing indisposition among the most earnest spirits in the ministry to talk unless they know what they are talking about. R. H. Tawney, foremost advocate of the nationalization of England's coal mines, has recently urged upon us that in so complex a problem as that in which he is most interested, the use of hazily defined terms by high-minded reformers is doing more harm than good. He urges the advocates of the reform to learn exactness and precision of speech. Professor Coe's entire career has been given to like emphasis. There is immense heat in the conscience of the ministry but it will burst into the flame that really gives light only under expert guidance.

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