

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN
POLITICS

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—A number of persons variously distinguished in different walks of life, and including the Archbishop of York, Dr. Maude Royden, Miss Margaret Bondfield, and Mr. Arnold Rowntree, have issued a manifesto, published in your columns on December 16, stating their belief "that the only solution of our difficulties . . . is to apply the principles of Christianity to our political problems." Among those difficulties they number the "anachronism" of poverty existing concurrently with "possibilities of material well-being which result from man's conquest of nature." And among the remedies they propose is "the study of economic and political questions in the light of basic Christian principles."

In this connexion I deem it not untimely to call attention to a lecture delivered by Sir Josiah Stamp in 1926 entitled "The Christian Ethic as an Economic Factor." The purpose of so doing is to rebut the dangerous fallacy inherent in that manifesto which, if it gains widespread acceptance, can only result eventually in a terrible disillusionment.

Perhaps the following extracts from the lecture will make clear its tenor and encourage recourse to its text:—

"I have noticed that the fervent and convinced statement on the platform that if only a spirit of universal brotherhood prevailed the problems of men would all be solved never fails to raise audible and enthusiastic assent. But such a statement is not merely wofully wrong in its emphasis; it is also mischievous, because it dopes men's minds till they cannot see what action is really necessary, still less ripe to action.

"Christian enthusiasts, desiring to remodel economic society, and offering prescriptions for it, need to devote a little less effort to the elaboration of Christian principles, and a little more to patient analysis and study, not of superficial social appearances and formations, but of underlying economic principles.

"The common assumption so tacitly made, that there is an accepted body of Christian ethics ready to be turned to any problem, is not justified.

"The injunction on all hands that Christian principles must be made to prevail in industrial and social life seems to me to raise certain presumptions without duly weighing them.

"There is nothing in ethics which can compel a given territory and organization to support a population of a particular size at a particular level of existence, though much current discussion seems tacitly to assume that if enough moral indignation is aroused the miracle can be worked.

"Suppose you find, on analysis, that high qualities of leadership and coordination are essential to such production as will maintain a vast population on present lines. How are such qualities to be enlisted? . . . The process of competition, and the survival of the fittest, is pretty ruthless, and doubtless makes blunders; it often seems to be irreconcilable with Christian ideals. But it produces some leaders and captains of industry. Dare we assume that choice by Christian virtue or by a call by the motive of service and not profit, will automatically select leaders as efficient economically?

"I think you might manage to agree voluntarily upon a non-economic but ethical scheme with more measure of success in a small-scale village industry with self-contained direct relationships of not more than two removes between purchaser and consumer, between director and directed. But such a scheme of society must hopelessly fail to provide a decent standard of life in these islands for 46 millions of people, and I doubt if more than half could actually remain alive."

To me it seems a most cruel and unfair thing to raise the hopes of large sections of the community that their conditions will be improved unless there is some certainty of those hopes being fulfilled. And when the specific recommended in so facile a fashion for this purpose may conceivably worsen those conditions by reason of the inevitable working of economic laws (if we are to believe a foremost authority on their operation), then indeed I for one tremble for the people and echo his words. "Let us remember that evil is wrought by want of thought as well as want of heart."

I am emboldened to write this letter as one of those appealed to by the manifesto who recognize ethical values of a Christian character.

Yours, &c.,
MARCUS SAMUEL.

House of Commons.

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Tunis, 18.9.27.

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LEAGUED FORCE

ACTION UNDER THE
COVENANT

THE LIMITS OF A CONTRACT

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—When the League of Nations Union was formed during the War under the presidency of Lord Grey of Falldon, with the assistance of Professor Gilbert Murray, Mr. H. G. Wells, and a handful of enthusiasts, we were occupied for months in long and lively discussions as to what should be the constitution of the League.

Should the League of Nations be founded on a basis of moral obligation, like the Ten Commandments, or on a contractual basis? In the early literature of the League of Nations Union we had argued that war could only be abolished by the attainment of a higher standard of morality: that the business of the League must be to convince the conscience of mankind that wholesale homicide is only murder writ larger: that what was wanted was not a Covenant but a Creed and determination to preach a gospel of peace to all peoples. I believe that in 1919 the world was ready to listen to such a message, but lawyers had their way and the League of Nations was built upon a contractual basis.

What is the contract? Does the Covenant of the League of Nations really impose upon the members of the League any obligation to give assistance to any member State that is the subject of aggression?

The recent discussion in your columns assumes that such an obligation exists and turns straight away to the question of whether the obligation to resort to the use of military, naval, or air force is absolute or conditional, in the case of each member of the League, on such member being satisfied that the amount of support forthcoming from other members will be effective to restrain the aggressor.

I will not contest the authority of the distinguished lawyers who inform us that a legal obligation of that kind might exist. But under the terms of the Covenant it seems clear that no question of any such obligation on the part of members of the League can arise until other events of supreme importance have taken place. Clause I of Article 16 provided:—

Should any member of the League resort to war in disregard of its Covenants it shall *ipso facto* be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to the severance of all trade or financial relations . . . and the prevention of all financial, commercial or personal intercourse between the nationals of any other State, whether a member of the League or not.

Following upon the action prescribed by Clause I, Clause II of Article 16 declares that:—

It shall be the duty of the Council *in such case* to recommend to the several Governments concerned what effective military, naval or air force the members of the League shall severally contribute to the armed force to be used to protect the Covenants of the League.

No consultation between members of the League or of the Council is contemplated under Clause I. The obligation is immediate, universal, and imperative. The members of the League undertake to prevent all the countries of the world, whether members of the League or not, from entertaining relations of any kind with the offending member, after which the members of the Council are to sit down and consider whether military, naval, or air force will also be required.

Since the framers of the League of Nations chose to build their structure upon a basis of contracts and covenants, it is pertinent to observe that there is a legal maxim which says that no one can, by any contract, be bound to do what is impossible. It is not possible for the members of the League to prevent the rest of the world, including the United States, Germany, and Japan, from diplomatic, commercial, or personal intercourse with an offending member.

Yours faithfully,
CHARLES A. MCCURDY.

2, Brick Court, Temple, E.C.4, Sept. 15.