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A. Victor Murray

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

A FREE SOCIETY

I SOCIETY AND HUMAN NATURE

It is a commonplace in the thought of our time that the world is facing a crisis of a kind that has never before been known in history. One of the signs of that crisis is the division of the nations between various forms of authoritarian rule, of which Communism is the most notable, and various forms of democracy in those areas which for want of a better name we call the 'free world'. How free that free world is may be a matter of doubt, for within each of the so-called free countries we meet a growing challenge to liberty from administrative bodies and from industrial organizations.

These outward divisions, moreover, represent, and are sustained by, a climate of opinion which is found on both sides of the Iron Curtain and which is very largely hostile to liberty. Indeed the very term 'a free society' in the title of this book would be completely unacceptable to large numbers of people who are unaffected by any political or ecclesiastical authoritarianism. We are witnessing a flight from freedom not only in political institutions but also in philosophy, in social life and in religion. Mankind is spiritually homeless and the attempt to find a home is so nerve-racking that many are only too glad to drop into the nearest doss-house that can afford them shelter, no matter what may be the name above the door. These hotels of the spirit are very popular and their attraction lies in the fact that everything is laid on. There is no need to accept responsibility, and there are various ways of avoiding it. The philosophers avoid it by limiting their concern to the literal meaning of words, and 'semantics' is the popular substitute for thought. The economists are content with analysis, as if diagnosis were equivalent to treatment. For those who want religion there is every variety of authoritarianism from the funda-

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mentalist sects to the Church of Rome. And with Communist nationalism in mind the words of Simone Weil strike home, that 'revolution, not religion, is the opiate of the masses'.

Nevertheless, I suggest that political and social happiness is to be found only in a free society, that is to say a society which is not dominated by any sectional interest, political, economic, social or ecclesiastical, to the subordination of all else. I have purposely used the phrase 'sectional interest' for I believe that no free society is possible without regard to ultimate spiritual values, but regard for values is a different thing from domination by an institution, even by an institution that professedly stands for those values. Some of the marks of such a free society would be a political structure in which no man is compelled to be an object for the satisfaction of other men's desires, where the law is above the State, where we have an extended franchise, an educated democracy, freedom of speech, worship and movement, full employment, a concern for standards of quality as the basis of a standard of living, and a society which is informed by genuine acceptance of the principle invented but also travestied by the Communists, 'from each according to his ability: to each according to his need'. Tried by such criteria it is clear that Russia is not and has no desire to be a free society. South Africa is not a free society, nor Spain nor the Irish Republic, nor India, for each of these is dominated by a sectional interest of some sort—ideological, racial or ecclesiastical. Indeed it may be doubted if there is a free society anywhere, for it is possible that every country is under the sway of some dominant group; the United States, for instance, controlled by the supporters of private enterprise and Britain by organized and still more by unorganized labour.

The conception, therefore, of a 'free society' is an expression of an ideal in process of slow realization. To accept it requires an act of faith which not everybody is willing to make. Ideals are suspect nowadays, for ever since World War I we have alternated between idealism and materialism and have ended up in disillusionment. The heaven on earth promised by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 has turned for millions into its hateful opposite. An appeal

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to the Fifth Amendment to the American Constitution, intended by the Fathers of 1791 to be a safeguard of liberty, has turned out to be almost a confession of treason. The League of Nations and the United Nations have both made the justice of a war depend entirely upon procedure and they have both been helpless in the face of an aggressor who ignored the rules of the game. The gift of freedom to the South African Boers after the war of 1899–1901 has in the long run been made use of to enslave their black fellow-countrymen under the forms of law. The happy condition of a free Ireland eagerly foretold in bardic song has in the event given rise to a state in which the elected representatives of the people are subservient to an irresponsible ecclesiastical hierarchy. The welfare state in Britain has become hag-ridden with regulations, and full employment has resulted in absenteeism, wasteful personal spending and a lowering of the standard of work. A ‘free society’ is a beautiful ideal but it is quite impossible of attainment, human nature being what it is.

‘Human nature being what it is’ would appear therefore to be the stumbling-block in any move forward to genuine freedom. It is because this consideration has been left out of account by builders of the New Jerusalem that the foundations have given way. The liberalism of the nineteenth century was ‘moonstruck with optimism’—to use William James’s notable phrase in another context. John Stuart Mill really did believe that men were the best judges of their own self-interest, and he and others looked forward to that ‘stationary state’ in which there would be the perfect balance of supply and demand, wages and profits, rent and interest, freedom and authority. Tennyson visualized a parliament of man and a federation of the world, and Maurice, Kingsley and the Christian Socialists made a small beginning with self-governing workshops whose very existence depended on a factor which was discovered to be missing, namely a genuine altruism. All utopias have come to grief on the rock of original sin, and our generation, while it is willing and even eager to admit the failure, is strenuously unwilling to admit the cause of it. Consequently men put their trust in ideology, in machinery, in pacts and concordats and treaties,

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every one of which assumes that men will abide by their promises. The Psalmist praised the righteous man who ‘swearth unto his neighbour, and disappointeth him not: though it were to his own hindrance’, but this kind of righteousness in these days is in very short supply.

Granted then that human sin is the real root of all our troubles, is there any way of so ordering society that the devices and designs of sinful men may be neutralized, or, alternatively, that men’s instincts for peace and good will shall be made regulative over all the rest?

2 THE ‘GOOD NEIGHBOUR’

In such an inquiry we must be on our guard against two assumptions. The first I have already indicated—it is the assumption that a moral society can exist apart from moral men. The second is the assumption that moral men will of themselves constitute a moral society. It has often been assumed by Christian people that if only all men were Christians the resulting society could take care of itself. This over-simplification of the issue has been one cause of so much ineffectiveness in Christian thinking on social and political questions. The relations of people to one another in society raise issues which are present whether men are Christians or not.

Let us take two illustrations.

What ought to be the policy of the Australian Government towards immigration from Japan? The easy ‘Christian’ answer is ‘Let them all come’, and if the world were governed by love and good will it would appear that this was the only proper answer. On the other hand, to allow unlimited immigration of people with a much lower standard of living into a continent which has a high standard of living not only lowers the general standard all round but also puts thousands of people out of work. To rob Peter to pay Paul is not only false economics but it can scarcely be called Christian. If all Japanese and all Australians were God-fearing church members the problem would still be there. And this problem is not peculiar to this situation alone. Lord Keynes pointed out that full employment, if it is to be world-wide, will inevitably mean the

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acceptance by many people of a lower standard of living than that which they now enjoy. How can this problem be solved by simple personal acceptance of the Christian faith?

Again, what is the proper Christian procedure in a mixed society where, say, a majority of people are Christians and the others are not? Should we wait for unanimity? Is it the Christian thing for a majority to coerce the minority? Or is it wise, out of true gentlemanly and Christian feeling, for the minority to be allowed to frustrate the will of the majority? In the United States some years ago we saw the working of one of these kinds of coercion. Prohibition of alcoholic liquor was hailed by many of the churches as a glorious triumph of Christian principles. The consequences, however, were so appalling and led to such a lowering of moral standards that the prohibition had to be repealed.

All such beliefs as these rest on a rooted conviction that companies of men can be brought to act in the same way as individual men, and that the ethics of the 'good neighbour' are the same for the group as for the individual. Consequently in some theological quarters there has been a harking back to the days of Aquinas or of Calvin, when this identification was accepted, in the hope that we may find in these ancient writers the guidance that we need in our present discontents. But their times are not our times nor their ways our ways. The pattern of society that they had in mind was that of the village community where every man knew his neighbour, where buying and selling went on before the eyes of all, where supply and demand could roughly be foreseen and adjusted, and where the community was at hand to deal with disagreements. Even where the village community had given way to the town the thinking about this question still presupposed its continued existence. But in these days when our breakfast coffee comes from Brazil, our cereals from North America, our bacon from Denmark, our sugar from the West Indies, how can we possibly assemble the simple equation which will enable us to pay our neighbour the 'just price'? The neighbour nowadays may well be someone we have never seen, someone of a different nationality, of a different race and colour and creed, living at the

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ends of the earth. The relations between us may be governed by factors for which none of us is responsible and which indeed few of us understand. The belief that all political and social problems are at bottom moral problems is a dangerous popular simplification. Being half a truth it is also half a lie, and it does not help us much in our present situation. Ours is a world mechanized, industrialized, urbanized and international. Both its oneness and its separateness are features of an entirely different kind from any that have been seen in the past.

There is a further consideration to be kept in mind in view of the upsurge of nationalism in Africa and the East. The political development of these nations has hitherto been dependent on the West, and Western culture has been for nearly two thousand years impregnated with Christian principles even though it may have turned aside from Christian practice. But today over a large part of the earth's surface there is an indignant rejection of the Christian way of life. This is true of practically the whole of the continent of Asia, including Asiatic Russia, China, India and Burma. Mr Nehru, with singular ignorance of history, has referred to Christianity as a Western religion, and the new national states of the East have come to look upon Christianity as both alien and hostile. The African situation was until recently somewhat different, for animism has no sacred books such as are found in Hinduism or Buddhism to act as a substitute for the Christian Bible. The tremendous growth of Islam, however, in West Africa, has given many Africans an alternative which they feel to be more consistent than the Gospel, while many of those who have grown up under Christian mission influences have become increasingly uneasy at the connexion between European suzerainty and the Christian Church. Certain questions, therefore, are unavoidable. How is it possible even to think of a Christian sociology when one half of the world is not Christian at all? Whence are to come the spiritual sanctions which alone will make possible an unselfish community life, and how can there be such a thing as a 'free society' when people's views about freedom are so widely diverse? Political thinking in these days must take into account the brutal

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fact that the old foundations of Western life in Roman law, Greek philosophy and Christian ethics are not shared by the continent of Asia, nor are they accepted at any rate for the time being by the mighty Russian empire. Moreover, the East, not content with a rejection of Christianity, is concerned to replace it with something else. In 1957 the Prime Minister of Ceylon opened in Colombo a training school for Buddhist monks. An appeal was made for one million rupees to enable Buddhist missionaries to be sent to Germany 'to spread the light of the Gospel of Buddhism in darkest Europe'.

3 DEFINITIONS

Clearly such a situation as this requires a reorientation of the idea of the Church and the idea of the State.

Of the Church it is needed because ethics are now no longer merely domestic, whereas the Church's concern in the past has been primarily with personal relations on a small and intimate scale. It is needed also because in these bitter forty years of war and its aftermath the Church itself has come under the fire of judgement. It cannot in these days rest upon a 'fugitive and cloistered virtue' which slinks out of the arena in which men are struggling both for their lives and for their integrity. It has been accustomed to judge men and nations. It has now had to recognize that all judgement must begin at the house of God. The priest or the parson, the elder or the deacon, the theologian or the missionary, is a man of like passions with other men, and he is under judgement like other men. Any judgement he makes comes back upon himself and he is at once non-suited in any claim he may make for exemption. Even the impressive façade of the Church of Rome has shown cracks under this strain. The movement started by the worker priests of France was symptomatic of a much greater hunger and thirst after righteousness than the hierarchy could appreciate, let alone supply.

And further, such a reorientation of the idea of the Church is needed because in Protestantism at any rate, the 'impregnable rock of Holy Scripture' as Mr Gladstone called it, and in the sense in which he meant it, has ceased to be an adequate or even an

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appropriate foundation for the faith. Yet in a quite different historical, rather than dogmatic, sense the Bible has a far more secure and defensible position as the rule of faith and standard of conduct than ever before. But this new knowledge is as yet the property of a small minority, and it not only requires a more widespread acceptance but it also needs to be worked out as a rule by which men live and by which they are prepared to die. This was the strength of the old belief in verbal inspiration and it needs to be recaptured. Meanwhile the old authorities, Roman and revivalist, are having it all their own way, and the curious thing is that so often the modern scientist, keener on certainty than on truth, finds this dogmatic position singularly attractive. To know where one stands, especially in a world of flux like the present, is a most desirable object. It would seem therefore that there needs also to be a reorientation of Protestantism as a whole. There are, however, many inescapable difficulties, some of which we shall consider in the following pages.

The State, too, is changing. We shall notice shortly that progressive states—that is, those states where the Government expect from time to time to lose an election and to have people with other views and policy put in their place—are developing more and more the idea of the State as society instead of simply the government or the official class. The family, consciously, or unconsciously, is becoming a pattern for politics which enlightened statesmen tend to follow and seek to realize. This in itself brings a new crop of difficulties. Concern for the several members of the family may be and indeed is exploited, and the beneficiaries of the Welfare State become so fascinated by their new rights as to lose sight of their old obligations. The elementary fact that benefits must be paid for and can be paid for only out of taxation takes on the appearance of a compulsory levy by an alien authority for no obvious purpose. The time gap between payment and benefit may be so wide that one side is not discernible from the other, and the very people who benefit will be most uncooperative when the time for payment comes round. Furthermore, the inclusion of all citizens within the family of the State has brought about a shift

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of power from politics to industry. Organized labour and even labour that is not organized have a power in the community which can out-manceuvre any merely political device used against them. It is impossible to send to gaol an entire trade union, and where large masses of men are concerned it makes no difference at all whether their actions are declared to be illegal or not. The futility of such an attempt was seen in 1926 when Sir John Simon in three speeches proved that the strike was illegal. The only fit question to ask about such a declaration was 'So what?'—a question to which there was no answer.

It is obvious, therefore, that the idea of the State as well as that of the Church needs overhauling. And such overhauling needs to be practical. The world is sick of ideologies, as they are called, whether they are translated into practice as in Soviet Russia, or whether they exhibit only the cleverness of the disgruntled intellectual or the crude longing for power of the half-educated.

The relations of Church and State can be considered either in terms of the secular world in which we all find ourselves or in the general terms of the ideal free society which we hope to create and in which we hope to live. If we have in mind the present secular world we shall think of Church and State as institutions. From this point of view (and this alone) the Church is no more than a trade union or any other voluntary society. Indeed so closely akin is the Church to a trade union that many of those who profess to stand for what is called the 'Catholic' position are the very people who insist on the Church's being a 'closed shop'. A 'high' doctrine of the Church tends to result in an attempt to glorify the institution *as such*. (There are no 'high' or 'low' Roman Catholics; the terms are in use simply within Protestantism.) But an institution is not a divine society, whether Roman, Anglican or Free Church, simply because its members *say* that it is. And it is not always easy to see the marks of divinity in a body which has buildings and caretakers, pays taxes and insurance, and runs a magazine. The relation of such a body to the State is that of an organized unofficial society to the Great Society, the official State. In Catholic countries these relations are often

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the subject of concordats. These are of the nature of written constitutions by which the relations of Church and State are given a contractual basis. Such for instance was the concordat that Mussolini made with the Pope, and the even more interesting one signed on 27 August 1953 between the Vatican and the Spanish Government.¹ The contracting parties meet as equals, the one ecclesiastical and the other political. A concordat is a record not so much of their concord as of their differences, and at bottom it represents an arrangement between two diverse groups of men scrambling for power. The community at large is not a party to the proceedings and the worldly good of the institution is the only matter of concern. This type of relationship has characterized Byzantine Christianity from the very beginning. It resulted in politics being reserved wholly to the State but sanctioned by the Church, while 'spiritual' matters were reserved wholly to the Church protected by the State. This hand-in-glove policy made the Church completely ineffective as a challenge to the State, while religion degenerated into ritual and little else. No Western country, not even Italy, witnessed to such spiritual ineffectiveness as was shown by the Church in Russia under the Czars.

One matter which stands in the way of a free world is national and sectional sovereignty. It is quite impossible for unity to be achieved among the nations or among the churches unless each unit is willing to forswear its own sovereignty, and this is an attitude that cannot be adopted by calculations of profit and loss. Church and nation alike are peopled by ordinary human beings who are naturally jealous guardians of what they conceive to be their 'heritage'. It is of no account whether this heritage is conceived in ecclesiastical or in political or in social terms. It is guarded by the same human nature in every case. This idea of the heritage has in it if properly used, after the manner of the man in the parable who had five talents, a source of strength and an inspiration to progress. But unfortunately there is nothing so flattering to sinful human nature than this conception of guardianship of something precious that has come down to us from the

¹ See below, pp. 106ff.