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Evelyn Baring

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I

THE GOVERNMENT OF SUBJECT
RACES ¹

“*The Edinburgh Review*,” January 1908

THE “courtly Claudian,” as Mr. Hodgkin, in his admirable and instructive work, calls the poet of the Roman decadence, concluded some lines which have often been quoted as applicable to the British Empire, with the dogmatic assertion that no limit could be assigned to the duration of Roman sway. *Nec terminus unquam Romanae ditionis erit.* At the time this hazardous prophecy was made, the huge overgrown Roman Empire was tottering to its fall. Does a similar fate await the British Empire? Are we so far self-deceived, and are we so incapable of peering into the future as to be unable to see that many of the steps which now appear calculated to enhance and to stereotype Anglo-Saxon domina-

¹ *Italy and Her Invaders.* Thomas Hodgkin, D.C.L. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892.

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tion, are but the precursors of a period of national decay and senility ?

A thorough examination of this vital question would necessarily involve the treatment of a great variety of subjects. The heart of the British Empire is to be found in Great Britain. It is not proposed in this place to deal either with the working of British political institutions, or with the various important social and economic problems which the actual condition of England presents, but only with the extremities of the body politic, and more especially with those where the inhabitants of the countries under British rule are not of Anglo-Saxon origin.

What should be the profession of faith of a sound but reasonable Imperialist ? He will not be possessed with any secret desire to see the whole of Africa or of Asia painted red on the maps. He will entertain not only a moral dislike, but also a political mistrust of that excessive earth-hunger, which views with jealous eyes the extension of other and neighbouring European nations. He will have no fear of competition. He will believe that, in the treatment of subject races, the methods of government practised by England, though sometimes open to legitimate criticism, are superior, morally and economically, to those of any other foreign nation ; and that, strong in the possession and maintenance of

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those methods, we shall be able to hold our own against all competitors.

On the other hand, he will have no sympathy with those who, as Lord Cromer said in a recent speech, “are so fearful of Imperial greatness that they are unwilling that we should accomplish our manifest destiny, and who would thus have us sink into political insignificance by refusing the main title which makes us great.”

An Imperial policy must, of course, be carried out with reasonable prudence, and the principles of government which guide our relations with whatsoever races are brought under our control must be politically and economically sound and morally defensible. This is, in fact, the keystone of the Imperial arch. The main justification of Imperialism is to be found in the use which is made of the Imperial power. If we make a good use of our power, we may face the future without fear that we shall be overtaken by the Nemesis which attended Roman misrule. If the reverse is the case, the British Empire will deserve to fall, and of a surety it will ultimately fall. There is truth in the saying, of which perhaps we sometimes hear rather too much, that the maintenance of the Empire depends on the sword; but so little does it depend on the sword alone that if once we have to draw the sword, not merely to suppress some local effervescence, but to over-

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come a general upheaval of subject races goaded to action either by deliberate oppression, which is highly improbable, or by unintentional misgovernment, which is far more conceivable, the sword will assuredly be powerless to defend us for long, and the days of our Imperial rule will be numbered.

To those who believe that when they rest from their earthly labours their works will follow them, and that they must account to a Higher Tribunal for the use or misuse of any powers which may have been entrusted to them in this world, no further defence of the plea that Imperialism should rest on a moral basis is required. Those who entertain no such belief may perhaps be convinced by the argument that, from a national point of view, a policy based on principles of sound morality is wiser, inasmuch as it is likely to be more successful, than one which excludes all considerations save those of cynical self-interest. There was truth in the commonplace remark made by a subject of ancient Rome, himself a slave and presumably of Oriental extraction, that bad government will bring the mightiest empire to ruin.¹

Some advantage may perhaps be derived from inquiring, however briefly and imperfectly, into

¹ *Male imperando summum imperium amittitur.*—PUBLIUS SYRUS.

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the causes which led to the ruin of that political edifice, which in point of grandeur and extent, is alone worthy of comparison with the British Empire. The subject has been treated by many of the most able writers and thinkers whom the world has produced—Gibbon, Guizot, Mommsen, Milman, Seeley, and others. For present purposes the classification given by Mr. Hodgkin of the causes which led to the downfall of the Western Empire has been adopted. They were six in number, viz. :

1. The foundation of Constantinople.
2. Christianity.
3. Slavery.
4. The pauperisation of the Roman proletariat.
5. The destruction of the middle class by the fiscal oppression of the Curiales.
6. Barbarous finance.

1. *The Foundation of Constantinople.*—It is, for obvious reasons, unnecessary to discuss this cause. It was one of special application to the circumstances of the time, notably to the threatening attitude towards Rome assumed by the now decadent State of Persia.

2. *Christianity.*—That the foundation of Christianity exercised a profoundly disintegrating effect on the Roman Empire is unquestionable.

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Gibbon, although he possibly confounds the tenets of the new creed with the defects of its hierarchy, dwells with characteristic emphasis on this congenial subject.¹ Mr. Hodgkin, speaking of the analogy between the British present and the Roman past, says :

The Christian religion is with us no explosive force threatening the disruption of our most cherished institutions. On the contrary, it has been said, not as a mere figure of speech, that “Christianity is part of the common law of England.” And even the bitterest enemies of our religion will scarcely deny that, upon the whole, a nation imbued with the teaching of the New Testament is more easy to govern than one which derived its notions of divine morality from the stories of the dwellers on Olympus.

From the special point of view now under consideration, the case for Christianity admits of being even more strongly stated than this, for no attempt will be made to deal with the principles which should guide the government of a people imbued with the teaching of the New Testament, but rather with the subordinate, but still highly important question of the treatment which a people, presumed to be already imbued with that teaching, should accord to subject races who are ignorant or irreceptive of its precepts. From this point of view it may be said that Christianity, far from being an explosive force, is not merely

¹ *Decline and Fall*, chap. xx.

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a powerful ally. It is an ally without whose assistance continued success is unattainable. Although dictates of worldly prudence and opportunism are alone sufficient to ensure the rejection of a policy of official proselytism, it is none the less true that the code of Christian morality is the only sure foundation on which the whole of our vast Imperial fabric can be built if it is to be durable. The stability of our rule depends to a great extent upon whether the forces acting in favour of applying the Christian code of morality to subject races are capable of overcoming those moving in a somewhat opposite direction. We are inclined to think that our Teutonic veracity and gravity, our national conscientiousness, our British spirit of fair play, to use the cant phrase of the day, our free institutions, and our press—which, although it occasionally shows unpleasant symptoms of sinking beneath the yoke of special and not highly reputable interests, is still greatly superior in tone to that of any other nation—are sufficient guarantees against relapse into the morass of political immorality which characterised the relations between nation and nation, and notably between the strong and the weak, even so late as the eighteenth century.¹ It is to be hoped

¹ Any one who wishes to gain an insight into the fundamental principles which governed those relations cannot do better than

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and believed that, for the time being, this contention is well founded, but what assurance is there—if the Book which embodies the code of Christian morality may without irreverence be quoted—that “that which is done is that which shall be done” ?¹ That is the crucial question.

There appear to be at present existent in England two different Imperial schools of thought, which, without being absolutely antagonistic, represent very opposite principles. One school, which, for want of a better name, may be styled that of philanthropy, is occasionally tainted with the zeal which outruns discretion, and with the want of accuracy which often characterises those whose emotions predominate over their reason. The violence and want of mental equilibrium at times displayed by the partisans of this school of thought not infrequently give rise to misgivings lest the Duke of Wellington should have prophesied truly when he said, “If you lose India, the House of Commons will lose it for you.”² These manifest defects should not, however, blind us to the fact that the philanthropists and sentimentalists are deeply imbued with the grave national responsibilities which devolve on England, and with the lofty aspirations which attach

read the opening chapters of Sorel's *L'Europe et la Révolution Française*.

¹ Ecclesiastes i. 9.

² *Life and Letters of Sir James Graham*, vol. ii. p. 328.

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themselves to her civilising and moralising mission.

The other is the commercial school. Pitt once said that “British policy is British trade.” The general correctness of this aphorism cannot be challenged, but, like most aphorisms, it only conveys a portion of the truth; for the commercial spirit, though eminently beneficent when under some degree of moral control, may become not merely hurtful, but even subversive of Imperial dominion, when it is allowed to run riot. Livingstone said that in five hundred years the only thing the natives of Africa had learnt from the Portuguese was to distil bad spirits with the help of an old gun barrel. This is, without doubt, an extreme case—so extreme, indeed, that even the hardened conscience of diplomatic Europe was eventually shamed into taking some half-hearted action in the direction of preventing a whole continent from being demoralised in order that the distillers and vendors of cheap spirits might realise large profits. But it would not be difficult to cite other analogous, though less striking, instances. Occasions are, indeed, not infrequent when the interests of commerce apparently clash with those of good government. The word “apparently” is used with intent; for though some few individuals may acquire a temporary benefit by sacrificing moral principle