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CHRISTIANITY AND THE  
SOCIAL CRISIS

BY

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CHRISTIANITY AND THE  
SOCIAL CRISIS

To

THE WOMEN WHO HAVE LOVED ME

MY MOTHER

MY SISTERS FRIDA AND EMMA

MY DEAR WIFE PAULINE

AND

MY LITTLE DAUGHTERS WINIFRED AND ELIZABETH

THIS BOOK

IS LOVINGLY INSCRIBED

*THY KINGDOM COME!*

*THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH!*

## INTRODUCTION

WESTERN civilization is passing through a social revolution unparalleled in history for scope and power. Its coming was inevitable. The religious, political, and intellectual revolutions of the past five centuries, which together created the modern world, necessarily had to culminate in an economic and social revolution such as is now upon us.

By universal consent, this social crisis is the overshadowing problem of our generation. The industrial and commercial life of the advanced nations are in the throes of it. In politics all issues and methods are undergoing upheaval and re-alignment as the social movement advances. In the world of thought all the young and serious minds are absorbed in the solution of the social problems. Even literature and art point like compass-needles to this magnetic pole of all our thought.

The social revolution has been slow in reaching our country. We have been exempt, not because we had solved the problems, but because we had not yet confronted them. We have now arrived, and all the characteristic conditions of American life will henceforth combine to make the social struggle here more intense than anywhere else. The vastness and the free sweep of our concentrated wealth on the one side, the independence, intelligence, moral vigor, and political power of the common people on

the other side, promise a long-drawn grapple of contesting forces which may well make the heart of every American patriot sink within him.

It is realized by friend and foe that religion can play, and must play, a momentous part in this irrepressible conflict.

The Church, the organized expression of the religious life of the past, is one of the most potent institutions and forces in Western civilization. Its favor and moral influence are wooed by all parties. It cannot help throwing its immense weight on one side or the other. If it tries not to act, it thereby acts; and in any case its choice will be decisive for its own future.

Apart from the organized Church, the religious spirit is a factor of incalculable power in the making of history. In the idealistic spirits that lead and in the masses that follow, the religious spirit always intensifies thought, enlarges hope, unfetters daring, evokes the willingness to sacrifice, and gives coherence in the fight. Under the warm breath of religious faith, all social institutions become plastic. The religious spirit removes mountains and tramples on impossibilities. Unless the economic and intellectual factors are strongly reënforced by religious enthusiasm, the whole social movement may prove abortive, and the New Era may die before it comes to birth.

It follows that the relation between Christianity and the social crisis is one of the most pressing questions for all intelligent men who realize the power of religion, and most of all for the religious leaders of the people who give direction to the forces of religion.

The question has, in fact, been discussed frequently and earnestly, but it is plain to any thoughtful observer that

the common mind of the Christian Church in America has not begun to arrive at any solid convictions or any permanent basis of action. The conscience of Christendom is halting and groping, perplexed by contradicting voices, still poorly informed on essential questions, justly reluctant to part with the treasured maxims of the past, and yet conscious of the imperious call of the future.

This book is to serve as a contribution to this discussion. Its first chapters are historical, for nothing is more needed than a true comprehension of past history if we are to forecast the future correctly and act wisely in the present. I have tried to set forth the religious development of the prophets of Israel, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the dominant tendencies of primitive Christianity, in order to ascertain what was the original and fundamental purpose of the great Christian movement in history. Every discussion of the question which appeals to history has to cover this ground, but usually only detached fragments of the material are handled at all, and often without insight adequate to give their true meaning even to these fragments. I am in hopes that these chapters will contribute some facts and points of view that have not yet become common property.

The outcome of these first historical chapters is that the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God. The fourth chapter raises the question why the Christian Church has never undertaken to carry out this fundamental purpose of its existence. I have never met with any previous attempt to give a satisfactory historical explanation of this failure, and I



regard this chapter as one of the most important in the book.

The fifth chapter sets forth the conditions which constitute the present social crisis and which imperatively demand of Christianity that contribution of moral and religious power which it was destined to furnish.

The sixth chapter points out that the Church, as such, has a stake in the social movement. The Church owns property, needs income, employs men, works on human material, and banks on its moral prestige. Its present efficiency and future standing are bound up for weal or woe with the social welfare of the people and with the outcome of the present struggle.

The last chapter suggests what contributions Christianity can make and in what main directions the religious spirit should exert its force.

In covering so vast a field of history and in touching on such a multitude of questions, error and incompleteness are certain, and the writer can claim only that he has tried to do honest work. Moreover, it is impossible to handle questions so vital to the economic, the social, and the moral standing of great and antagonistic classes of men, without jarring precious interests and convictions, and without giving men the choice between the bitterness of social repentance and the bitterness of moral resentment. I can frankly affirm that I have written with malice toward none and with charity for all. Even where I judge men to have done wrong, I find it easy to sympathize with them in the temptations which made the wrong almost inevitable, and in the points of view in which they intrench themselves to save their self-respect. I have tried — so far as erring human judgment permits — to lift the issues out of the

plane of personal selfishness and hate, and to put them where the white light of the just and pitying spirit of Jesus can play upon them. If I have failed in that effort, it is my sin. If others in reading fail to respond in the same spirit, it is their sin. In a few years all our restless and angry hearts will be quiet in death, but those who come after us will live in the world which our sins have blighted or which our love of right has redeemed. Let us do our thinking on these great questions, not with our eyes fixed on our bank account, but with a wise outlook on the fields of the future and with the consciousness that the spirit of the Eternal is seeking to distil from our lives some essence of righteousness before they pass away.

I have written this book to discharge a debt. For eleven years I was pastor among the working people on the West Side of New York City. I shared their life as well as I then knew, and used up the early strength of my life in their service. In recent years my work has been turned into other channels, but I have never ceased to feel that I owe help to the plain people who were my friends. If this book in some far-off way helps to ease the pressure that bears them down and increases the forces that bear them up, I shall meet the Master of my life with better confidence.

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# CHRISTIANITY AND THE SOCIAL CRISIS

## CHAPTER I

### THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CHRISTIANITY: THE HEBREW PROPHETS

It seems a long start to approach the most modern problems by talking of men who lived before Lycurgus and Solon gave laws to Sparta and Athens. What light can we get on the troubles of the great capitalistic republic of the West from men who tended sheep in Judea or meddled in the petty politics of the Semitic tribes?

History is never antiquated, because humanity is always fundamentally the same. It is always hungry for bread, sweaty with labor, struggling to wrest from nature and hostile men enough to feed its children. The welfare of the mass is always at odds with the selfish force of the strong. The exodus of the Roman plebeians and the Pennsylvania coal strike, the agrarian agitation of the Gracchi and the rising of the Russian peasants, — it is all the same tragic human life. And in all history it would be hard to find any chapter so profoundly instructive, and dignified by such sublime passion and ability, as that in which the prophets took the leading part.



Moreover, the life and thought of the Old Testament prophets are more to us than classical illustrations and side-lights. They are an integral part of the thought-life of Christianity. From the beginning the Christian Church appropriated the Bible of Israel as its own book and thereby made the history of Israel part of the history of Christendom. That history lives in the heart of the Christian nations with a very real spiritual force. The average American knows more about David than about King Arthur, and more about the exodus from Egypt than about the emigration of the Puritans. Throughout the Christian centuries the historical material embodied in the Old Testament has been regarded as not merely instructive, but as authoritative. The social ideas drawn from it have been powerful factors in all attempts of Christianity to influence social and political life. In so far as men have attempted to use the Old Testament as a code of model laws and institutions and have applied these to modern conditions, regardless of the historical connections, these attempts have left a trail of blunder and disaster. In so far as they have caught the spirit that burned in the hearts of the prophets and breathed in gentle humanity through the Mosaic Law, the influence of the Old Testament has been one of the great permanent forces making for democracy and social justice. However our views of the Bible may change, every religious man will continue to recognize that to the elect minds of the Jewish people God gave so vivid a consciousness of the divine will that, in its main tendencies at least, their life and thought carries a permanent authority for all who wish to know the higher right of God. Their writings are like channel-buoys anchored by God, and we shall do well to