

The Church and Social Problems (1910)

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Address (in substance) of Alice Paul, of Moorestown, N.J., on Woodbrooke Day at Haverford Summer School

Any inquiry into the condition of the churches to-day must consider the gulf existing between the church and the working class. We hardly realize, I think, that by a great section of the proletariat our religious organizations are regraded as the stronghold of hypocrisy and oppression. We hardly realize the bitterness that that these workers fell toward us as they repeat once again: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers. Therefore, shall ye receive the greater damnation."

For something like forty years those two schools—the one which lays stress on economic forces and the other, represented by the churches, which lays stress on moral forces—have been growing farther apart and understanding each other less and less.

We find the president of American Federation of Labor, for example, saying that his associates have come to regard the ministers and the churches as the apologists for the wrongs, indeed the defenders of the wrongs committed against the people.

Turning from organized labor to the more revolutionary movement, we see open enmity toward the church. At best it is regarded as but a luxury for the well-to-do. But more often there is extended to it active opposition as an institution standing as sponsor for the social maladjustment of our time. The radical labor literature of our country breathes this note of hostility from the first page to the last.

Victor Berger, the leader of the Socialists in Milwaukee, told us the other day that the workingmen of Milwaukee are no longer Lutherans, are no longer Catholics, belong no more to their various churches—but are very good Socialists. He seemed to think that he was putting in antithesis two incompatible positions. This is but one instance of the way the intelligent workingmen, who are turning for help to an economic movement, are at the same time abandoning the religious movement in the feeling that the ideal of a better condition for men on

earth is so divorced from the ideal of the church, that fealty to the one implies severance from the other.

And why should this be? Certainly the withdrawal of large numbers of workmen from the church is not due to any hostility to religion. As John Mitchell, the prominent labor leader, had told us – this withdrawal “is not a protest against religion itself, but is attributable to an impression that there is, on the part of many of our churches, an absence of sympathy with the ideal of the working people and with the movement through which they are striving to ameliorate the conditions under which men live and work.”

We must agree, I think, that the church has lost its influence among the masses of the people largely because to-day, as at so many previous periods of its history, it has departed from that primitive Christianity which, let us never forget, had its inception among the outcast and lowly; because it has merely an academic interest in those “that labor and are heavy laden”; because it is not standing as a rebuke to the social iniquities about us; because it is not insisting upon a literal application to our social and economic life of the injunction: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” We know that a few ministers who have insisted upon a literal interpretation of that precept in every-day life have thereby lost their pulpits. To-day we are conscious as never before of our membership in the social organism. One feels that infidelity to that organism is the great infidelity and that according as the church faces the social chaos about it will it be of service to its time.

And how is our own Society meeting these social problems? We know that Friends have acquired a reputation for the probity of the individual so that the very word “Quaker” has come to be synonymous with all that is straightforward and upright. We younger Friends, who have done absolutely nothing ourselves, must feel that adverse criticism of our Society on our part would be most unfitting – that if we can but carry on unsullied the character which has been handed down to us, we shall, indeed, have done well. And yet, perhaps, we may all consider together where in our Society can be strengthened.

The Friend, we know, is reputed as one whose individual conscience is keenly alive, but whose social conscience is atrophied. We are told that we are so introspective, so absorbed in developing

our own characters into perfect flowers that we have no time for the great social movements that are bent on making such development possible for all. As we look at the placid, comfortable attitude with which Friends regard the social ills about them, it seems indeed a far cry to the aggressive vigor with which the early Friends challenged the evils of their time. Should those pioneers come amongst us to-day with their titanic energy, their insistent zeal, I think they would feel that we were not of their kin – and we undoubtedly would look askance at them as fanatics.

There is no religious body which has more splendid principles and traditions of democracy than has ours. But to-day, though we cling in large measures to the simple speech and simple dress, I think we have forgotten the spirit of democracy of which that speech and dress were but the token. Let me give an instance. The needs of a certain reform movement were being laid before a friend whom I know. This Friend is most punctilious as to plainness of speech and garb. Yet her first question was: “What sort of people are taking this up – what is their social caste – are they *ladies*?” This is an extreme case perhaps. There are probably few who would have asked such a question. And yet, in this exaggerated form, we can see how we are, possibly, clinging to the letter which killeth and losing the spirit which maketh alive.

When we go into reform circles to-day, we find that it is no longer to Friends that these workers are turning for help. In those circles we are regarded as conservatives, as reactionaries. Sometime ago an organizer of a reform agitation was planning to carry her campaign into a certain city. There were many Friends in that city and I offered to give her their names as, theoretically at least, Friends stand for this movement. She thought an appeal to them not worth her while however. “I know all about Friends,” she said, “they will hold a conference or two and talk a great deal, but as to the active, aggressive work necessary to push this through, they will be of no use.” This verdict may have been unjustified; but the fact that such a view is held, and I know widely held, is reason for thought.

At the beginning of our Society we were as a whole poor, without influence, and with not much education. To-day we are considerable in numbers; we have greater influence, leisure, wealth, a better education

than ever before. Then, why should we be so impotent compared to the early Friends? We are nowhere so numerous or so influential, I suppose, as in this State of Pennsylvania, and yet there is probably no State which is more under the domination of the criminal elements. This State, at the last census, had over thirty-three thousand children under sixteen at work in manufacturing industries alone. This was the State which, of the six leading industrial States, had the greatest illiteracy among its children between the ages of ten and fourteen. As we realize these and kindred facts, we must feel that we are not measuring up to our work, to our opportunities.

We can hardly believe that the character of Friends to-day is different from that of the members in early times- that to-day they are any less eager to work than in those far off days. A Friend wrote to me once: "I so wish that I had been born in the anti-slavery period so that I could have taken part in that great campaign." Many seem to cherish such a feeling. But these are just as stirring times in which we live to-day, and the need for workers is just as great, did we but know it.

Not long ago I came across a description by a distinguished English woman of a visit to a Friends' meeting and community. She was impressed most of all, she said, by the happiness of the people; but, she added, they seemed to have no realization whatever of the conditions which made such happiness impossible for the majority of people in the neighboring city. This, it seems to me, puts the whole case succinctly. It is simply that we are, to a great extent, unaware of the social conditions about us. With unsparing devotion, the individuals are pouring out their service in behalf of their own immediate circles - but with society as a whole, they are not in contact- they do not know its needs. Could we but take them into the mills where children are toiling at an age when they ought to be living with fairy tale; could we but taken them into those factories, for instance, where women are employed at machines of such a character that three months of the work means the forfeiture of the power of motherhood; could we but place them face to face with the grim realities surrounding them, it would mean, in many cases, the awakening of the social conscience, the birth of an overmastering desire that such injustice to the individuals, such injustice to the race, should cease off the earth.

Our discussion to-day is in relation to Woodbrooke. I have read that John Wilhelm Rowntree said, not long before his death, that the next ten years would show whether the Society of Friends in England could still be of service and had a future before it. With the view of enabling it to be of greater usefulness he was instrumental, I understand, in founding Woodbrooke. As we look at our Society here, the same means of increasing its power comes to our mind. There is some talk of a Woodbrooke in America. As to the practical aspect of the question I know nothing, but, if it be possible, I wish that we could have such an institution – not for academic work, for that we can get at the universities; not for technical training in social work, for that we can get at the Schools of Philanthropy, – but as a place that would take us, young and old, for a little time and give us the first impulse for service, give us the necessary inspiration and vision.

A friend in Philadelphia, a woman of about thirty-five I should think, told me that after she left college, her life had been absolutely empty. She was eager to use her energy but knew of nothing to do. About six months ago she met a person who is working devotedly for a certain reform. This chance meeting with an individual, whom she has never seen but that once, has transformed her life. She has thrown her splendid gifts into this same movement and all this ability and power which were being lost to society have now been drafted into its service. What that accidental meeting unconsciously did for this woman a Woodbrooke might consciously attempt to do for our members. It might be able to draw into the service of humanity vast areas of untapped energy at present going to waste.

We read that in the early times Swarthmore Hall was a kind of central altar fire to which the Friends from all over the kingdom turned, and where the flame in their souls was enkindled anew. What Swarthmore Hall was to our founders we might hope that a Woodbrooke would become to us, helping us to be worthy of the great traditions which we have inherited, making us more valiant soldiers in humanity's cause than ever before – a central fire enkindling anew the life in our Society.

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