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THE MORAL AND RELIGIOUS EFFECTS OF THE WAR ON THE FRENCH PEOPLE.

BY REV. R. SAILLENS, COURBEVOIE, FRANCE.

One good result, at least, of the tremendous struggle for life in which France is engaged, will be that the world will have a better knowledge of, and a greater respect for, her true character, than ever before. I do not simply mean that Germany is discovering that she had underestimated the strength of our national fibre, but also that even our friends will have to revise some of their opinions concerning us. France has been commonly represented as a light-headed nation, whose supreme passion was the love of pleasure; and the admiration of some people for her on that account was more humiliating than the stern rebuke others thought fit to inflict upon us. But few did recognize that, along with the artistic and optimistic temperament which marks our Celtic race, there is a stubborn disposition to resist, to hold on and to endure—a patience which was born of the suffering of long ages. The French are a nation of hard-working, hard-saving peasants, passionately attached to their fields, which their fathers conquered and defended against invaders, feudal lords, and tyrannical kings, in numberless wars, through fifteen centuries. There is a tragic element in French history, which has put iron into our blood; and it has been a surprise to many, to find that this country is yet very far from having become as anemic as some prophets had surmised.

Do you remember the struggle of another kind which we passed through, not many years ago? I refer to the celebrated Dreyfus case. The way in which public opinion in France went overwhelmingly on the side of right, as soon as the evidence was made plain, showed to thoughtful men all over the world that the moral sense of this nation was still unimpaired. The rights of a mere individual—who was not, by any means, a popular char-

acter—weighed in the balance against the strongest political motives, which were urged by some of the most influential among our leaders. With all her shortcomings, France did not level herself to the baseness of a Pilate. She did not wash her hands over the fate of an innocent man wrongly condemned.

Take another fact: The Separation of Church and State, which became a law in 1906. This was done, not as some believe, as an act of hostility to religion, but as a logical outcome of the principles proclaimed by our republican Constitution. The French Republic was the first nation in Europe to carry out this great reform. It was done in all fairness, with due respect for the consciences of religious people, and they were all satisfied, except the Romish clergy, which is never content unless it has a monopoly over the souls of men.* This courage and the moderation exhibited by our people on that occasion, the seriousness with which the whole thing was done, are additional proofs of that which I am trying to demonstrate: that France was not in a decadent state, as many outsiders too readily believed.

And it is a remarkable fact that, just when France was ridding herself of state religion, a new spirit was coming over her intellectual leaders. The materialistic philosophy of the 19th century was giving way before an idealistic doctrine, with such spokesmen as Professors Bergson, Boutroux, Henri Poincaré (cousin of the President). While Nietzsche was conquering Germany, these

*The neutrality of the state in religious matters necessarily implied, in a country like this, the suppression, in all state-supported schools, of religious teaching. For there cannot be neutral religious teaching in a country where 98 per cent. of the people are nominally members of one church, especially if that church teaches officially that the neutrality professed by the state is in itself a sin. The church of Rome will never willingly submit to be put on par with other churches, and therefore our government is not to blame when it refuses to play in the hands of the church by having official recognition of God which, to the public mind, would be the recognition of the church's claim to be His only legitimate representative.

men taught, with increasing success, in our universities and reviews, the overwhelming value of the spiritual. Some of the new leaders went farther than this, and step by step evolved towards Christianity. The conversions of Brunière—our greatest literary critic—and Francois Coffée, one of our greatest poets—were real. They went to the Catholic Church, not having probably, a sufficient knowledge of the Gospel to understand fully the beauty of a free faith, and being prejudiced, as even the most enlightened are in this country, against the multitudinous and puzzling forms of Protestantism;—but there is no doubt that they sought and found refuge at the cross of Christ. Nor were they the only ones, among our intellectual men: hundreds followed their lead. Among them, the name of one is particularly dear to the present writer. Charles Peguy, who has just been killed, while fighting as a hero, at the head of his men (he was a lieutenant of the Reserve), was a writer of a most peculiar genius, a poet and a prophet in one. Beginning his career as an agnostic, he evolved into a Christian, writing on the Parables of Christ: the Prodigal Son and the Lost Sheep—pages full of a charm which will not be surpassed. Two or three years ago, moved by one of his books, I went to call at his small office, and had a long talk with him. “I admire your writings,” said I, “but I want you to be frank with me. Do you really believe in the miracles and facts of the Christ, or do you merely take them as themes for your beautiful poetry?” The young artist looked at me earnestly: “I believe,” he said, “from the bottom of my heart; I have come back to the early beliefs of our life after having proved the emptiness of unbelief. I have come back through the way which naturally opened to me: had I been born a Protestant, I probably would have become a believing one; I was born a Catholic, I am a believing Catholic. But the Christ is all and everything to me. I have many Protestant friends, whom I love and respect.” This frame of mind is that of many earnest

young men today. They are, or are trying to be, "liberal" Catholics; our hope is, that they will see the untenability of that position, and that they will be led by the Spirit into the full light and liberty of the Gospel.

I have indulged in these reminiscences of the time before the war, in order that my readers may better understand what the spiritual drift was then. Of course, there was another side: The masses of the people were still sunk in the practical materialism which had reigned so long. There were scandals in our political world. Drink was on the increase; the birth-rate was decreasing. And now the war is doing a great work: it is laying bare our weak points, and endowing with new power the ideals which have never ceased to be honoured in this country, though they have been at times, sadly neglected. I shall give a few facts which will show that France, in her immense suffering, is still loved of God, whose spirit is at work in her midst.

The first of these hopeful facts is *the spirit of seriousness* which has come over the country. I am old enough to remember the war of 1870; there could not be a stronger contrast than that between the attitude of the nation *then* and *now*. No bragging, very few demonstrations of easy patriotism; no pretense to be *la grande nation*; but, in every breast, the sense of having been unexpectedly and unwarrantably assailed, and a strong, one might say, a mystical condition that the eternal principles of Right, Justice and Liberty are at stake, and that they must be defended to the last drop of blood. A righteous cause elevated its defenders. Men whose lives were commonplace, or even frivolous, have become puritanic. Theatres and music-halls have been purified; a friend of mine counted in his district 80 drink-shops that have been shut since the opening of the war; and even those which remain open do not have half the business which they used to have.* The tone of the daily press is high; it is a con-

*I need hardly remind my readers that absinthe and similar drinks have been entirely prohibited by law, a few weeks ago.

stant appeal to that which is noblest in man; *devotion to principle*. We are not fighting for aggrandizement (except that we dearly hope to regain that bit of France which was torn from us: Alsace-Lorraine). Every Frenchman understands that this is a struggle between two doctrines: "Might is Right" on the one side, and "Right above Might" on the other. The ideals incorporated in the old hackneyed words, *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, are those for which we stand. They are evangelical words, though their upholders know it not. And thus, there is a sort of religious fervor among our people, for which we are deeply thankful to God.

The second fact I want to underline, is a *growing sense of dependence on the Almighty*. In town and country, the churches are crowded; in many places extra services are being held daily. These services are, of course, mainly ritualistic, with little for the soul to feed on; but it is a moving sight to look on thousands of people in a large Paris church, at some exceptional service, standing up for an hour or so in perfect silence in front of the altar, while a priest mutters his Latin prayers. Then follows a short sermon, with little Gospel in it; but such as it is, one is thankful that a few crumbs of the heavenly bread are offered to these multitudes.

Nor are the Protestant churches of all denominations keeping idle at such a time as this. Please bear in mind that all the Protestants together, including the advanced rationalists, the evangelists and the nondescript sorts—represent only one and a half per cent. of the entire population. And yet, the moral, religious and social influence of the Protestant communities is making itself felt far beyond that which such small numbers could lead one to expect. I could enlarge very much on this point: it would be a revelation, I feel sure, for some of our friends, and a wonderful illustration of the power of minorities, when they are on the side of truth.

But I must limit the scope of this article to actual facts. A large number of pastors are in the army, and their letters, as well as those of the young Christians of our churches and associations who are at the front, testify that a wonderful work is going on among the men. Thousands of Gospels have been given away, and are now being read in the trenches by men who never saw the New Testament before. The manifestation of religious faith, far from eliciting ridicule or opposition, is received with respect. A young officer, member of a Baptist church, writes me that he has been able to pray with all his men, all Roman Catholics by birth, and that while he urged them to give their hearts to God in accepting the free grace of Calvary, many were moved to tears. Indeed, it seems as if the national revival which we have long expected in vain were beginning now, *in the trenches*, and that missionaries are being forged in the fires of this war, for the labors which the times of peace will set before us.

What will be the outcome of this war, morally and spiritually?

It is difficult and dangerous to prophesy. For the present, the moral outlook is brighter than it has ever been in our life-time, and probably since Reformation times. There is not yet such a deep *sense of sin* as we should desire; but there is that which leads to it: a sense of helplessness, a great crying after God. "I should fail in my duty," writes Paul Bourget in a daily paper, *L'Echo de Paris*, the circulation of which is immense, "I should fail in my duty if I did not emphasize the paramount importance which, at the present hour, the religious problem is taking among us. France suffers, and, as every suffering human creature, she needs God, because she needs to know that suffering has a meaning. To believe in God is first to affirm that life and death mean something; that there is an intelligence, a justice, an infinite love which accompanies us through trials, the mean-

ing of which is unknown to us. . . To believe in God, at this very minute, for the soldier who falls, away from father, mother, wife, children, friends, means this: 'Some one pities my distress!' And for these—father, mother, children—it is to be able to reply to the piercing cry which they divine, 'Thou hast not lost us!' . . . It is to feel, it is to think that the universe is not an implacable machinery made up of blind wheels which, sooner or later, must crush us, but that there is a flexibility in the necessary laws, an amount of freedom in their adjustment, of kindness in their intentions; and because of these intimate convictions—to believe in God is to be able to pray."

Much more could be quoted from various authors who had not accustomed us to such a kind of literature. The French soul is passing through a purifying process. God is preparing her for the proclamation of the pure Gospel, when the war being over, facilities for travel and for large meetings in tents and theatres will be resumed.

But this raises a question: Will not this religious movement lead France back to Rome—which, of course, would mean the curtailment of our religious and civil liberties, and an impossibility to propagate our faith on a large scale?

That there will be a larger number of *bona fide* Roman Catholics after the war, there can be little doubt. The "Church" is the only opened door to many genuine seekers after God; they know of no other intermediary between their souls and Him.

But it must not be forgotten that France has seldom supported the extreme politics of the clergy, and never for a long time. Our people make a thorough distinction between *the religious* spirit and the *ecclesiastical* spirit. Clericalism, I believe, is forever dead in this country. The priest may perforce be accepted as the necessary agent of proper religious observance; but he will not be trusted

with the management of public affairs. French citizens, even religiously disposed, will never go to the confessional to receive their voting ticket.

The equivocal attitude of the present Pope with regard to poor, heroic Belgium, a nation more devoted to the Romish see than any other on earth—the sinuosity of his politics between Germany and Austria on the one hand, and Italy on the other; his evident desire to reconquer his temporal power and to make everything subservient to this one object,—all this does not tend to make him popular in France. In short, France needs God, but fears the priest. What an opportunity for the testimony of those of us who humbly believe we have found the truth that saves the souls of men, and that frees the nations!

Extract from a letter of a Protestant Chaplain at the front:

“.... I shall not mention the daily difficulties of our task; they are great. An army corps is an immense parish; in my corps, we have 7,000 or 8,000 Protestant men, and I am the link between them and their families.

“.... What joys there are in the task! I return from our services, moved, enthusiastic, breathing with open breast the hope of a magnificent future.... Our services are most impressive: real revival meetings! The Gospel seems to have acquired a new savour; the heads bow of themselves under the voice of prayer, and our dear old hymns take a new meaning: I should like you to hear our heroes singing: ‘I need thee every hour,’ or ‘Safe in the arms of Jesus.’ (These hymns have been translated into French.) We cry and we sing; we mix our voices with our fears, in thinking of the absent ones. We live hours of intense and heavenly communion. When the service is over, we take the addresses of new men, we give away Gospels—we never have enough!

“We are at a moment of indescribable preparedness. A student said to me: ‘I pray all the day long in the trenches.’ Another, ‘I had gone away from God; now, if I am spared. . . .’ Even the hooligans (apaches) who say: ‘If we escape death our way of living will be different.’ And, to wind up, mark the peculiar savour of these words, spoken by common laborers: ‘This war will teach us to behave better with our women folk.’ ”