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SACRED AND PROFANE HISTORY.

BY

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XVI.—SACRED AND PROFANE HISTORY.

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Our modern fondness for looking at well nigh everything historically, and the development of several new social sciences, notably economics, sociology, and comparative jurisprudence, have combined to foster so multiform an interest in the past, and have led to so vast and so varied an accumulation of historical knowledge, that the venerable term "history" seems no longer adequate to designate multitudinous and heterogeneous events and conditions, which often appear to have little more than their bygoneness in common. Like an overgrown empire, history threatens to be disrupted into its component parts. If the late Professor Seeley was right, it has already become only "the name of a mere residuum which has been left when one group of facts after another has been taken possession of by some science." This residuum, Professor Seeley believed, must go the way of the rest, the time being "not very distant when a science will take possession of the facts which are still the undisputed property of the historian."

That history will even thus softly and suddenly vanish away, like the baker who met a Boojum, we none of us really fear. But it is clear enough that should such a general dissolution take place, its results would be most unhappy all around. No one can fail, of course, to appreciate the advantages of specialization. It would be as preposterous to impeach it as it would be absurdly gratuitous to defend it. The scientific indispensableness of specialization is everywhere recognized, and many would claim a high educational value for it too. Without the continued productions of monographs like those of Stubbs, Hefele, Rashdall, Lea, Harnack, Voigt, Henry Adams, dealing with some one phase of human organization or interest, or some brief period, progress would cease. Yet this special-

ization has concomitant disadvantages which need to be emphasized.

Only comparatively recently have constitutional, economic, and legal history, and the development of philosophy, morals, art, and literature become separate fields, subject to intensive cultivation. We have hardly had time as yet to see what effect this subdivision will have upon our educational system or upon the historical treatises which are prepared for the public. But the past furnishes us with a singularly conclusive proof of the disastrous results of putting things asunder which are indissolubly associated by nature. The earliest form of specialization in history, so far as I am aware, was the distinction made between sacred and profane history—a distinction that has been perpetuated by our habit of setting off church history by itself as something concerning only the theologian.

This differentiation was not due, it is true, to that scientific ambition for precision and thoroughness which dictates to-day a careful separation of economic or literary history from what we may vaguely call history at large. While our modern specialization is first and foremost a division of labor, a conscious concession to the exigencies of investigation, the older distinction between sacred and profane history was at first a matter of sentiment, then, later, of prejudice and ill will. That certainly renders its consequences doubly noxious; but if our newer scientific specialization does half as much to distort and obscure our general conceptions of man's past as the older has done, it will do incalculable harm.

We have unwittingly permitted our modern enthusiasm for the principle of the separation of church and state to effect a corresponding divorce in our historical studies. The result has been that we have failed to reckon with a tremendous force whose nature and workings should logically be our first and chief preoccupation in approaching the history of Europe during the past fifteen centuries. I believe that it would not be difficult to prove that no single factor in European history, whether we regard the growth of the state or the development of culture, can in any way be compared in its constant, direct, and obvious influence with the Roman church. Yet our prejudices, or our thoughtlessness, practically exclude the church from consideration in our manuals of general his-

tory and in our academic instruction. Something is said, of course, of the mischievous influence of the papacy, of its encroachments on the poor, suffering emperors and kings, of the terrible wickedness and degradation of the ecclesiastical system, which Luther bravely showed up. There is, perhaps, a perfunctory tribute to the monkish scribe busily copying Horace's Satires, or a word about the Truce of God, but the church is known mainly for the pope's arrogance, the wrangling theologians, the inquisition, for its "pigges bones" indulgences, dirty friars, and sly Jesuits. How, it may be asked parenthetically, would the state, that noblest of man's creations, to many the very central theme of historical research, appear if we heard only of royal adulterers, of star chambers, and ship money, of George III's "golden pills," and Tammany's insolence? In short, the church has been represented as a gigantic conspiracy consistently hostile to the normal and beneficent social organization. But in reality it was the most characteristic and natural production of European society as it existed in the Middle Ages. It was brought forth and maintained by the most distinguished men of the period; it included among its officials pretty much the whole educated class. As we revere our Federal Constitution today, so Europe, high and low, clergy and laity alike, revered the constitution of Holy Church for a thousand years.

We all know well enough that no band of conspirators could erect a permanent system opposed to the needs and ideas of the period, but habit and the force of ancient prejudice leads us to relegate a study of the hierarchy to the church historian, while the term history means, as usually received, those matters unconnected with the church, which appears on the scene only as a marplot.

It is true that we no longer speak familiarly of Antichrist, the Scarlet Woman, or the Mystery of Iniquity, as did our ancestors, but centuries of Protestant polemic has transmitted to us a dull, persistent suspicion of the Mediaeval Church and all its works, which haunts the minds of otherwise impartial scholars. Another circumstance has, moreover, blinded us still further to the real historic importance of the ecclesiastical organization. We live in an age strikingly secular in its spirit and in a country where the exclusion of the church from all governmental functions and its reduction to a group

of voluntary private associations has been carried out with a consistency perhaps unparalleled in the world's history. The mediæval system, which Europe has by no means altogether outgrown, appears to us so monstrous a violation of the principles of civil government that only by a persistent and strenuous cultivation of an artificial historical sympathy can we come to comprehend it, even imperfectly. The position of the church to-day in England and France is full of mystery to us. Court of Arches, church wardens, advowsons, lords spiritual, all are wholly alien to our notions of government and property, and yet they are but the scanty vestiges of a cunningly devised system under which Europe lived for ages—a system which must be understood before there is the least chance of understanding the most serious, perhaps, of all the momentous problems which have faced Europe during the past five centuries.

The Mediæval Church was no exclusively religious organization. It was a state as well, a state rivaling a continental bureaucracy in the importance and variety of its functions and in the precision and efficiency of its mechanism. As Maitland well says: "We could frame no acceptable definition of a state which would not comprehend the church. What has it not that a state should have? It has laws, lawgivers, law courts, lawyers. It uses physical force to compel men to obey its laws. It keeps prisons. In the thirteenth century, though with squeamish phases, it pronounces sentence of death. It is no voluntary society. If people are not born into it, they are baptized into it when they can not help themselves. If they attempt to leave, they are guilty of *crimen læsæ majestatis* and are likely to be burnt. It is supported by involuntary contributions, by tithe and tax."¹ It is obvious that this ecclesiastical state, the most powerful, extensive, and enduring social organization of which we have any record, bears little resemblance to our Protestant communities. The danger of using the same word for what Innocent III and Mr. Moody understood by church is indeed appalling to a teacher who sees the disparity. If we had occasion to deal with the Council of Jerusalem, as described in Acts, and the Council of Trent, or with the University of Bologna in the

¹ Canon Law in the Church of England (1898), pp. 100-101.

thirteenth century and that of South Dakota to-day, we should immediately recognize the necessity of making plain the ambiguity of the terms as the very first step in our explanation. Now, while our students and the general public may well have a shrewd suspicion, after studying one of our current manuals, that the church over which Hildebrand presided must have been very different from the Baptist church around the corner, they have no means of appreciating the real nature of the difference or of estimating its tremendous importance.

The same danger of confusion exists in the case of the civil authority, for we are almost sure to assume a fundamental resemblance between the feudal anarchy and our modern state. When Gregory VII hotly asserted that the civil rule was the invention of evil men, instigated by the devil, it was, after all, no hasty conclusion but the outcome of years of observation. We should doubtless all have agreed, could we have witnessed the conduct of the average ruler of those days, that the Pope's theory of the origin of the state was a fair working hypothesis, all things considered. The dictum of Thomas Aquinas that the secular power is subject to the spiritual, as the body to the soul, was no empty claim. It was not only the most generally accepted opinion, but corresponded pretty well with the actual political and social relations of the Middle Ages.

If, then, both church and state in our modern sense were unknown in Europe until comparatively recently, might it not be worth while to explain so fundamental a matter in our manuals, and endeavor especially to make clear the general organization of the church, its functions, the sources of its power, and the public support which it enjoyed? Indeed, is there the least prospect that the public will understand the history of Europe at all until we mend our ways and give the church its due place? It would hardly be exaggerating its importance if we said that the chief interest of the earlier Middle Ages lies in the development of the Roman Catholic Church; that of the later Middle Ages in its controlling influence at the height of its power; that of the past five centuries in the revolution which overthrew it and replaced it by our modern state and our modern culture.

In spite, however, of my conviction that the neglect of the church is the most conspicuous defect of our instruction in general history, I should be quite misunderstood if it should

be inferred that I advocated a more general attention to church history. Not at all; I am not, as I indicated at the start, making a plea for any special field of research, but for a rational reconstruction of our conception of what should be included in a general review of Europe's past. To deal with the Lutheran revolt without understanding how the church was a secular as well as a religious institution is like presenting our civil war as simply the outcome of a different conception in North and South of the nature of the Constitution. To define the French Revolution, as De Tocqueville does, as the destruction of the feudal system is to belittle it. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy betokened as vital a metamorphosis as the decrees of August 4-5 abolishing the feudal dues. So no elementary study of either the Protestant revolt or of the French Revolution can be satisfactory so long as we continue to neglect one of the greatest factors in both movements.

Our attitude toward church history should be on the whole our attitude toward economic or constitutional or literary history. We must divide the vast stock of historical data and conclusions accumulated in all the fields of special research into two separate parts. All that is of a technical nature should be classed "professional," and should usually be so formulated as best to serve the purposes of the expert. The exact contents of St. Francis's first rule, the finances of Glanbenbury Abbey at the end of the fifteenth century, or the diplomatic antecedents of the Seven Years' War do not directly concern the public or the students in our schools and colleges. On the other hand, there is much in the thorough-going revision which is going on of our notions of man's past which persons with no special knowledge of history will be glad to know and will be the better for knowing.

This distinction between the technical and professional and the popular and general phases of our subject doubtless appears to be very trite and very self-evident. Trite it is not, however, for only modern conditions have rendered it imperative, and so little self-evident is it that some of our most serious perplexities may be ascribed to a failure to recognize it in our instruction and writing. In this country at least history is hardly yet regarded as a technical subject reserved for those who have been prepared by professional training to pursue it. Until recently all our historical works were sup-

posed to meet the needs both of the public at large and of the rare student who might appreciate the purely esoteric. Obviously we can not continue to do this, for, in the first place, the scholar is becoming more exacting and demands a concise, technical statement of the results of research; in the second place, if the public and our college students are to gain the best which history has to give, our whole energy must be directed toward freeing our presentation from every unessential detail which serves only to obscure the great issues and transformation of the past. No detail may be admitted simply because it is true or "interesting" or important to a specialist. Each particular detail chosen must substantiate, enliven, or illustrate the manifold general truths whose number and importance increase daily.

"The history of education," Rashdall well says, "is indeed a somewhat melancholy record of misdirected energy, stupid routine, and narrow one-sidedness. It seems to be only at rare moments in the history of the human mind that an enthusiasm for knowledge and a many-sided interest in the things of the intellect stirs the dull waters of educational commonplace."¹ This depressing reflection is as true of historical instruction as of any other branch of education. But we are now all busy stirring the dull waters of educational commonplace. The development of special historical studies implies a careful reconstructing of our general view of the whole subject; and whether we ultimately accept Ranke's view that the foundation and development of the political order is far the greatest achievement of our race, that it alone gives continuity to the story of the past, or whether we discover in the progress of culture the true import of history, we shall learn to look back with amazement and pity upon a period when general history was taught as if the Church of Rome were a negligible factor.

¹ Universities of the Middle Ages, II, 705.

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