

EDUCATION IN AN ABNORMAL SOCIETY

In a recent essay on education in a Catholic review, the writer was concerned to show how "vocational education" (*i.e.*, school training in manual work for particular occupations) might be accompanied by "cultural and religious" training so that pupils should have the advantages of all three. He was anxious that clerical attainments should not make for contempt of manual work, but thought that all would be well if teachers would "blend but not confuse" in those whom they taught the "three streams of education, the religious, the cultural and the economic." So taught (he concluded hopefully) "the individual will be content to earn his living at the job, whatever it may be, that he is best fitted to perform."

The writer was a man of great experience in education, but it is to be regretted that words like "culture" and "vocation" should have been used without apology as they are used by secular sentimental thought; that almost no reference should have been made to Christian principles and tradition; and that any idea of integration should, seemingly, have been dismissed from the writer's mind. Doubtless he thought some truths too plain to need repeating; I differ, and shall repeat them here.

Let us state first some platitudes upon human work and then return to this business of education. Man in general is called by God to some kind of work, without which he "shall not eat." Man is a rational being and a member of society. His work must be worth doing, or he offends his own reason; it must be useful to others, or he forfeits his claim upon society. Hitherto, the greater part of mankind has found such work in the provision of food (the work of peasants and shepherds and fishermen) or in the making of things (the work of builders and carpenters and potters). Others, a far smaller number, have found it in the care of men's selves (the work of governors, soldiers, physicians, teachers, philosophers, priests). In a normal society, work

in any of these kinds has a fundamental likeness: it is worth doing, and is therefore agreeable to reason; it is useful to the community, and is therefore rewarded by the community; it is all in some sense a co-operation with nature and with God's purpose, and is therefore man's first means to happiness and sanctification.

Work in a normal society is a way of life; or if you prefer, a particular kind of worker has a particular way of life which springs organically from the work itself. The peasant is more than a worker on the land; but all that he does and makes belongs to the land. He sings at his work, but his songs are not the ballads of courtiers or the shanties of sailors. He is a member of a family and of a community, but they are a peasant family and community, whose talk and proverbs, whose church and inn and cottages are different from their counterparts in a fishing village or in a town.

Education in a normal society is the grafting of the knowledge proper to "this" man on the knowledge proper to man in general. Man in general must know his nature and destiny and how to talk and think; such knowledge comes naturally from instruction in church and from converse with the community. "This" man must know how to do or make the particular things required of him by his work; such knowledge comes naturally from apprenticeship to the work itself. Schools and schoolmasters are a necessary means of education for those whose work cannot be done without book-learning; for others they only become necessary if it is thought that a knowledge of reading and writing is proper to man in general. The older civilizations postulated a knowledge of visible symbols instead.

Culture in a normal society is the flower or fruit of such education, supervening when a man's working life has been grafted on the traditional wisdom of the community. The culture of the English peasant is expressed in the whole visible aspect of English fields and villages, in folk-songs and in the traditional names of flowers. An acquaintance with "fine arts" unrelated to life and a knowledge of mis-

cellaneous "facts" is not only not culture, it is a thing destructive of culture. English countrymen possessed a culture when they made the song called "Searching for Lambs" and gave to flowers the names of Snapdragon, Ragged Robin and Love-lies-bleeding. Their descendants to-day, who can listen on the wireless to German drawing-room *lieder* and spell out in school the jargon of botanists, have not only lost that culture but are being insulted in their loss of it. It is as if you prevented a Catholic from ever going to Mass and then offered to teach him how to enjoy the weekly sermon in the *Times*.

For our society is not a normal society. Its deviation from the norm might be discussed at any length, but may be summed up in two phrases: Modern society subjects the spiritual to the temporal; and it mistakes means for ends. The results of this deviation are beyond number. What concerns us here is that work is no longer considered a way of life, and that its worth and usefulness are no longer regarded.

Even in England to-day the two chief kinds of workers remain; let us call them, for simplicity's sake, the land workers and the artisans. But what is their way of life now? The land workers have long since been dispossessed of their own land; their natural communities have been broken up; and though their work remains worth doing and necessary to the nation, it is so little recognised for such that the workers are despised, great numbers of them have been enticed into cities, and at the moment I write some of the best ploughland in Wiltshire is about to be made a nursery for tanks.

The artisans are worse off, for the nature and purpose of their work have both been corrupted. The artisan was once a responsible artist (responsibility being so obvious a condition of his work that it was taken for granted in normal societies). Now, generally speaking, he neither is nor is expected to be responsible for the quality of his work; he is either a machine-mimic or a machine-minder. If the things he makes are still useful by nature, their manner of making

lessens their usefulness. (We still need tables and chairs, but not these tables and chairs, which are weak in use and bristling with art-nonsense. We still need bread, but not this kind of bread, which tastes nasty, goes stale in two days, rots the teeth and induces blotches and blains.) Many of the things he makes are in no sense useful. And finally, he may at any moment be thrown out of any work soever by the functioning of machines; it being the function of machines to throw men out of work.

Of those who are neither land workers nor artisans some follow the traditional "professions," working as soldiers, teachers, physicians and so forth. For our present purpose, they may be considered as working traditionally, though this is not strictly so. In any case, they are few. On the other hand, a once minor class has become vastly important—the class of merchants and "men of business."

The merchant was once a kind of worker. Less venerable than the priest or peasant, he nevertheless served society by fetching and carrying and arranging the product of other men's work. (The old-fashioned village grocer used to blend his teas himself to the taste of particular customers, and was in so far an artist.) Some merchants perform their old function still, and are useful and lawful workers. But modern merchants in general, and still more modern men of business—the owners of stores, the heads of vaguely-named "firms," the contractors of industry—are not concerned with arranging and distributing useful things but simply with buying anything cheap and selling anything dear; and this is not an accidental or private vice, but the whole reason of their business. They claim to organise other men's work; actually they disorder the very nature of work, since by the power of their money they compel men to work in an inhuman way and to make things as things should never be made. They decree what goods the consumer shall have, and what and how the craftsman shall make; and whereas it was once said, "He that hath not the craft, let him shut up shop," it is now the craftsman who shuts up shop to work irresponsibly in a factory.

BLACKFRIARS

For these rulers of our society the one test, the one conceivable test of human doing and making is the gain or loss of money. If anyone doubts this, let him consider the justly famous words of the Chairman of the Cunard Company: "The sole factor in our policy has been, and always will be, to strive to choose such a policy as in our opinion is most likely to produce dividends. It is that consideration and no other which has produced the *Queen Mary*." (Letter to the *Times*, 15th January, 1936.) It is that consideration and no other which is the test of most work to-day; a test which seems natural not to company directors only but to nearly everyone else. The test by money has infected society; it has infected language. When men speak of profit and loss, they mean profit and loss in money. When they say that someone has got a "better job," they do not mean that the work is better suited to his capacity or better worth doing; they mean that he gets more money by it. They know what is meant by gaining the whole world; they do not know what is meant by losing one's own soul.

In such a society work is a "job," not a vocation. When (as Graham Carey has said) men no longer earn in order to go on working, but work in order to go on earning, the idea of vocation—of a calling by God—becomes a mockery. God does not call men to earn money no matter how.

Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws
Makes that and the action fine.

Thus George Herbert summed up the Christian doctrine. The sweeping of rooms and the governing of nations, the tilling of land and the writing of Divine Comedies, the making of pots and pans and icons, the building of huts and houses and cathedrals—all these things may be done and have been done as for God's laws. But to mind machines while they turn out bad work for which you are not responsible, to help to put plaster of Paris into bread, to take an inferior part in the juggling of stocks and shares—how can you do these things as for God's laws and make the thing and the action fine?

No one would claim, I think, that the characteristic activities of modern life are themselves a means to holiness. We are told, no doubt rightly so, that you can be a good Christian in a factory (i. e., *although* you work in a factory, you can still pray and go to church and refrain from obvious vices); we are not told that you can become a better Christian *by working* in a factory. Yet in a normal society it was a simple truth that work itself was a means to holiness—the work of ploughing and common crafts no less than the *opus Dei*.

With vocation goes training for vocation—that is, as I claim, education itself. If men are not called to work in factories, neither can they be educated to work in factories. The teacher aspires to save their minds as the priest aspires to save their souls—in spite of their work. And in such conditions the teacher's own work is a deviation from the norm, since he is generally a guardian of charges rather than a master of apprentices. Nevertheless, as a guardian of charges he has important duties. Given the modern conception of education—book-learning for everyone for several years, to be used hereafter not in work but in leisure—the teacher is responsible, not only for the kind of learning provided, but for the general moral guidance of his pupils (a thing which properly belongs to parents and community, but in the collapse of tradition has been delegated to him).

With the kind of learning provided I am not here concerned; though I believe it could be more usefully directed. Moral guidance is a graver matter; and here our teachers seem often to have neglected their duty and opportunities in this very matter of work and vocation. For though there is little work to-day which is really worth doing or really useful, some such work remains; and it is a clear and important duty of the teacher to distinguish good from bad and to urge his pupils to choose the good—where choice is possible. Often it is not, and therefore it seems to me cruel as well as foolish to write that under some system of education “the individual will be content to earn his living at the job that he is best fitted to perform.” Well, he might

BLACKFRIARS

be! But there are thousands who are not allowed to earn a living so, for the only jobs they can get are such as no human being is fitted to perform. In their case all a teacher can do is to inculcate heroic virtue. But where there is still a choice between human and inhuman work—if a boy can earn a living wage on the land, as a jobbing gardener, by making anything useful in a responsible way—then let him be urged to do so rather than mind machines or serve a stockbroker. And let the reasons given be the simple ones; that these things, and not the others, are useful and worth doing and the kind of thing man was meant to do.

I have been speaking chiefly of the poor, who in any case matter most. But teachers of the well-to-do and the rich might also do something for their pupils. If it were explained (and believed) that a "good post" is not the same thing as a highly-paid one, these boys also might be persuaded to choose useful work rather than a useless job; it might mean in their case that they earned four hundred a year perhaps instead of six hundred. I suggest at random that a rich young man might build decent plain houses rather than design Gothic town-halls and Graeco-Roman banks; or that instead of buying chemical-brewery shares he might set up a "free house" which provided honest food and drink.

These proposals are no solution of education's problems; nevertheless, the things I have said seems to me to concern professors of education more closely than their professed business. Education itself I believe to be impossible for most people in our abnormal society; meanwhile, those engaged in teaching should know where they stand.

WALTER SHEWRING.