

JOHN WESLEY AND CHRISTIAN PEACE

SOME little time ago the present writer was ordered by his Prior to speak at an Inter-denominational Anti-War demonstration on Hampstead Heath. The demonstration was no doubt due to a widespread opinion that, all physical and political expedients for ensuring peace having failed, the only hope for peace would be through moral means. This opinion bore on its face the outline of sanity and almost of inevitability. Indeed so sane and inevitable did it seem, and does it still seem, that even men who profess to believe that religion is the opium of the people are often found blaming the ministers of religion for not bringing in, as by a miracle, the reign of peace.

The difficulty I felt in being obedient to the command of obedience was not a distaste for any command. Still less was it a disagreement with the belief that no physical nor political expedients but only moral expedients will end war. But I felt a great disinclination to speak on an inter-denominational peace platform; and that, firstly, because of an inevitable conclusion and, secondly, because of an undeniable observation.

The inevitable conclusion was that if war could be ended only by moral means the chief agents in ending it could only be the moral expert or professionals, namely the ministers of religion.

The undeniable observation was that nowhere was there such a state of war and such a need of peace as in the sphere of religion.

This conclusion and this observation made it impossible for me to mount a peace platform except with a deep sense of hypocrisy or of humility. To ask the politicians and the statesmen to listen to a religious plea for peace whilst I and my fellow ministers of religion were in a state of religious war seemed almost shameless hypocrisy. Unless I and my fellows deserved the reproach "Physicians heal yourselves" I could only say to the war-wearied people: "Do as we say,

and not as we do.' But, in saying that, the only plea for an inter-denominational peace platform with a moral appeal was blown to fragments.

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It is not international peace, it is religious peace that is now the chief need of the world.

Yet so many official and self-commissioned ambassadors of religious peace have died with shattered hopes or reputations that a way to peace seemed to rest only within the possibilities of omnipotence. Nowhere in the sphere of churchmen's actions or effective desires but only in the sphere of God's effective grace was there found any reasonable argument against despair. With both sides committed to a "Non possumus" attitude which forbade almost the preliminaries of discussion or even of explanation, religious peace seemed dead and buried without hope of Easter resurrection.

But the book which has stimulated this lengthy review is one to stimulate its readers into hope. Not the least hope-begetting page is its first page which makes despair almost a sacrilege. Let it be set down: "JOHN WESLEY IN THE EVOLUTION OF PROTESTANTISM by Maximin Piette, Doctor and Master in Sacred Theology of Louvain, M.A. of Harvard University, Laureate of the French Academy, Professor of History at Brussels. *Translated* by J. B. Howard, *with a Foreword* by Bishop F. C. Kelley and Dr. H. B. Workman.—London, Sheed & Ward. 1937."

When we add that the original French edition bears the *imprimatur* of Mgr. Ladeuze, Rector of the University of Louvain, the significance of the book is seen to be more than that of a historian's study on a great historical character.

It may well be questioned whether any book published in any language has been beflagged by so many significant names representing so many different peoples. The writer of the book and the Rector of the University who gives the book its *imprimatur* belong to Belgium. Their names on the title page of the book recall the debt of gratitude the Catholics of England owe to the little land that gave them shelter in their religious exile; and the equal debt of

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gratitude the people of England owe to the little people who were war-martyred for four years rather than tear up their bond of obligation.

The prize given by the French Academy recalls the land that gave us Bossuet's heroic if unsuccessful efforts towards religious peace, and St. Francis of Sales' inalterable mildness with Calvin and the Calvinists. Bishop Kelley and the translator speak for the New World where are foregathered more shades of religious thought than justified Pope Leo the Great's judgment on Rome; *magnam sibi videbatur assumpsisse religionem quia nullam respuebat falsitatem*. Lastly, the Wesleyan who sponsors the book and authenticates its portrait of Wesley is Wesley's fellow countryman.

The words of the Bishop about this book by a Franciscan Friar are of striking appositeness: "This is the kind of history we hope to have before the century is out. Rulers may still want flattery, statesmen apology and soldiers praise—for leaders want history shaped and trimmed to their own order and design—but the truth wants something else; something which does not exclude eulogies but does demand that they be tested by the facts. Therefore we do not find it strange nowadays to find a Jew eulogising the life and mastering the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, and a Franciscan friar writing the life of John Wesley."

These emphatic words written at the end of four centuries of religious wrangling mark a change of the tide.

The change of controversial tide is still further marked by what the Rev. Dr. H. B. Workman writes as a Foreword from the authenticating Wesleyanism of Westminster College: "Father Piette is not only a scholar with a very deep knowledge of the period and of the character about whom he is writing, but, even more important, he possess great sympathies with the spiritual movements which he discerns beneath the surface. There is no work on Wesley which I have ever read which seems to me to combine in so eminent a degree insight and scholarship together with a certain critical faculty, this last most advisable especially for those readers who are members of the Methodist Church."

These emphatic words uttered from the depths of a Wesleyan Sanctuary mark not only a change of the tide, but a lowering of the flood.

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If we make bold to plunder some of the good things of Dr. Piette's book, it is only to send our readers to the book which has provided our booty. Unless they have eyes that see not, they will marvel at what a son of St. Francis of Assisi has to tell them about a leader of Protestantism. The Wesley family itself will be the first marvel. The head of it, the Rev. Samuel Wesley is an early convert from Non-conformity to the Anglican Church. His gifted and widely-read wife Suzannah (Annesley) owes her conversion from Socinianism to her book-loving, God-fearing husband. In spite of a poverty which sometimes has to stint the parents' bread, John Wesley, their famous son, is the thirteenth of nineteen children. The love of God and the love of the children whom God sent are so sovereign in the home that when angered parishioners burn down the Parsonage, the father cries out, "Come neighbours, let us kneel down. Let us give thanks to God; He has given me all my eight children; Let the house go, I am rich enough." It was worthy of the author of a massive (most unreadable) commentary on Job.

The study of the mother of John Wesley throws light on those gifts of mind and soul which have won for her the title of "the Mother of Methodism." Her home life may startle Catholics by its many resemblances in means and method to the Catholic homes of penal and sub-penal years. This book-loving woman who never had good health and often had slender fare was mated to a book-loving husband whom she "loved, honoured and obeyed" in spite of his leaving her all the domestic and educational work of her younger children. The secret of her miracle of success was in her conviction that "God had honoured her by giving her the care of so many souls for whom she was to give Him an account at the last day."

Her uncommon gift of intelligence showed itself not

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unpsychologically, in her "ordering the day according to a fixed method." Yet it is amazing that this Mother of so large a family could "every day give two hours to meditation, one in the morning and one in the afternoon—and could find time for an examination of conscience and a quarter of an hour's recollection before family prayers"! To strengthen her soul for this almost cloister life, she found food first in the Bible and then mainly in the Imitation of Christ. In her admirable life of union with God through home-duties done willingly and well, she depended, perhaps, more than she knew, and more than we know, on that Catholic asceticism which was even then giving such masterpieces of life and literature to the world.

If we have dealt at length on this strong woman whose homecraft was of the highest, it is because there is a sense in which the spiritual movement which Wesley is taken to have begun in a college at Oxford, was really begun by the mother of Wesley in the home at Epworth. No wonder that the movement when it began its Oxford phase is faithfully described in these amazing words:

"He preached, as regards faith, the uninterrupted apostolical succession, which links up the Anglican Bishops with the first Bishops commissioned by the Apostles."

The idea of going back to the first days of "the Church for an hierarchical episcopacy led him, likewise, to reform his liturgical life to the most ancient usages."

Frequent Communion was one of the most "characteristic traits of the little company. In conformity with tradition they were careful to add a few drops of water to the wine used for the sacrament."

"(They refrained) from taking anything on Wednesdays and Fridays until after three."

Ministers who had not received their Ordination from the hands of a Bishop could not validly administer the Sacrament.

He approved of auricular confession and attempted to introduce it among his friends.

Wesley taught the spirit of prayer to his companions and introduced them to the practice of reciting the collect for the

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day not only at Prime, but at Terce, Sext and None. (page 283.)

No wonder that, as the writer chronicles, "Wesley was accused all his life of being a Papist."

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In the amazing success of this Methodist Movement there were three elements: 1st, the call to personal holiness; 2nd, the apostolate of the spoken word; 3rd, lay preachers or catechists.

1st. There is no doubt that the chief factor in spreading the Wesleyan movement was that, within the law-established Church of England, it was the first movement to deal with the individual as such and with individual holiness as such. Few accredited historians are now found to hold that the Tudor settlement of religion, whether under Henry or under Elizabeth, was primarily religious. If it was not primarily economic or political, it was so definitely economic and political that any concern for the religious state of individual souls is undiscoverable. It was a legal settlement by ordinary catastrophic or revolutionary methods. The normal machinery of legislation was used, as in such revolutions it is wont to be used, to give the new thing the semblance of being old. The very title of the new Liturgy, "Book of Common Prayer," and of the new legislation, "An Act of Uniformity," proclaim the fact that it is not individual Englishmen and Englishwomen that are to be considered, but the Realm, i.e., the Sovereign or the Sovereign Power of England.

But the Oxford movement which Wesley began took the individual soul in its relation to God as the be-all and end-all of religion.

2nd. Wesley agreed with St. Dominic that in order to beget or foster religion "the beginning is the Word."

Whilst not comparing him with his Catholic contemporaries in his opportunities for preaching the Gospel, we cannot help comparing the result of his use of his greater opportunities. No doubt some of our Catholic priests were aware of the value of the spoken word, and even toiled in that furrow. But which of them equalled this Oxford Fellow in

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his self-denying ordinance not to speak the language of the Schools, but the simple language of the people? Which of them in half-a-century of apostolic life had travelled, often on foot, 225,000 miles—and had preached some 40,000 sermons? Toil such as this would have raised up harvests from the barren rock. An Abraham such as Wesley could only raise up sons of Abraham.

3rd. It is not a little humiliating that at a time when Catholics in the foreign mission field were organizing valuable groups of catechists, or lay-preachers, they seemed unwilling or unable to organize them in the home missions where they were most needed. It was part of the genius of John Wesley that he had no hesitation in boldly copying the catechist or lay-preacher organization with a success which cost the English Church the working-class of England; and ended dramatically in what we of the old Church would call a schism from a schism.

When the existing authority of the Church to which Wesley had promised religious obedience would not grant his new methods of religious worship citizenship, the severance between the Mother Church and her child was complete. There was no formal excommunication of these seekers after personal holiness. Mother and child had simply grown apart.

The contrast between this earlier Oxford Movement and the century-later Oxford Movement has lessons which should not be ignored by anyone who, in days of dispirited believers, seeks to build up the walls of Jerusalem.

Methodism sprang up spontaneously from the womb of Anglicanism. It was begotten of a desire to do for the individual souls within the English Church what a Church is primarily intended to do. But the historic and legal Church of England, as Wesley found it, was not congenitally sympathetic with the individual. From the very first moment of the Methodist Movement it was inevitable that the end of the movement, though not the aim of the movers, would be outside the Church by law-established.

In striking contrast with this earlier movement which began from ascetical longings within the Church was the

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later Movement which was occasioned by the attacks made by those outside the Church. When the nation, expressing itself ultimately through Parliament threatened to disendow, and therefore disown, the Nation expressing itself religiously through the established Church, the only valid defence was by falling from a national to a super-national basis by asserting that the English Church was no more and no less than the Catholic Church in England.

The results of this claim were astounding both to those who made it and to those who were angry that it was made. The Bishops of the Church of England did not at once see that the claim to make the English Church the Catholic Church of England was giving them an authority higher than the Sovereign or the Sovereign Power in England by making them the successors of the Apostles. The severance between Anglicanism and Methodism was not to be repeated a century later when the Oxford Group though at issue with the Bishops in the matter of discipline, even of doctrine, were making a stand for episcopacy such as had not been made since Elizabeth's first Parliament silenced the Hierarchy by statutory enactments. While such as Keble and Pusey and Newman were exalting the Bishops there was little fear that any formal or effective act would turn Tractarianism into a schism.

Under Wesley and the Methodists, as under Newman, the central question had been "Authority." Wesley thought that the Church of England had no authority to quench the spirit that stirred in individual souls; and was all his life long looked on as a papist.

Newman thought that the Church of England had an apostolic episcopal power higher than the Crown of England; and died a Cardinal of the Roman Church because he believed his Bishop who told him that his place was Rome.

The contrast between the two men and the two Movements has so many agreements that their development may be one of the surprises of the century to come.

VINCENT MCNABB, O.P.