

Why are Men not more Religious ?

THE REV. A. W. PARSONS, L.TH.

(*Vicar of St. John's, Boscombe.*)

MAN is "incurably religious"; his hunger for peace, for final knowledge; for a key to the mysteries; for an anodyne against pain and sorrow, is inextinguishable. Many of us may have preached on Ecclesiastes vi. 7; iii. 11 literally rendered: "All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not filled. Also He hath set Eternity in their heart." I have always been supported in my own ministry by the conviction that men carry within their breasts immortal souls which yearn for God like exiles for their native air. Nevertheless these cravings assume different forms according to the prevailing pre-occupations of the age. And this is a hustling age in which initiative, energy and "punch" are prized above quieter graces—an age in which quick and visible results are demanded. It is an age, too, in which all men have received some education and some share in government—an age, therefore, in which men are accustomed to do some thinking for themselves and are apt to want "plain answers to plain questions" as well as "practical solutions to difficulties."

Most men to-day are more or less interested in religion. One small indication is that the parson is not avoided so much as he used to be. There is also a widespread instinctive admiration for the human character and ethics of Christ. But these friendly gestures do not often imply any great interest in institutional Christianity. I am most thankful for the men who do attend Church, but a much larger number give little or no support to it. I believe that a very large number of men are definitely anxious that the Church should continue to exist and flourish. In their own language they consider that it is "good for the kids" and "keeps the old woman out of mischief" and they will even admit that it

fulfils a useful function in the national life as at the King's Coronation, but they see no reason why they should support it actively.

No doubt there are growing numbers of human associations which may be said to have some kind of Christian ethic and which capture the allegiance of men, such as Freemasonry, the Labour Movement and various forms of charitable work. Many of those who are most active in philanthropic work rarely darken a Church door, though, on the other hand, most of the keenest supporters of such work are to be found, I think, amongst the more enthusiastic members of the Church.

When I was in Leicester I was put on a Committee appointed by the Bishop which carried out an intensive inquiry into the position in the Diocese with regard to men's work. Among other matters a questionnaire was sent out to every one of the 243 beneficed incumbents. Ninety-five per cent. of the replies were emphatic that there is no apparent hostility to church or religion and little or no anti-christian propaganda. Nearly all regard the majority of men as *friendly and indifferent*.

It is enough for most men to be content to believe that "we are all going to the same place." Many of them feel that their lives do not square with the teaching of Christ and while their consciences do not permit them to become or continue active members in the Church, they are not prepared to make the necessary surrender.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF THIS GENERAL RELATION OF MEN TO THE CHURCH?

1. *Our unhappy divisions and differences of opinion within the Church* are often considered unworthy of it and they leave the impression that no guidance that is of value is to be found in Christianity as it is set forth by the Church.

Many men have told me that the Church is engaged in continual bickering and appears to be wanting in loyalty to its leaders. The Bishops in their Lambeth Letter, 1930, declared that this generation is "looking for leaders and will follow if given a lead which is both sane and daring." Yet as we look around we see Christian groups feverishly manœuvring to maintain their positions in the midst of a civilization

which does not recognize the Christian community as a decisive or even important factor in the realization of its destiny. The Church to-day appears at least on the surface to put more faith in manipulation and adjustment than in the possibility of individual and social transformation and recreation. "The most characteristic 'Christian' response to the problems of the modern world," writes the Editor of "The Student World," "can best be described by the word 'manœuvre,' rather than by the word 'message' and in the game of manœuvre between civilization and the Christian community civilization will win hands down." The strategy of manœuvring to attract interest and retain adherents has failed. The strategy of message was being tried before the war to some extent through the emphasis on Evangelism, but to affirm a message is infinitely more difficult than to plan a manœuvre, especially to a Church that on the whole has been more interested in Modernity than in the Word of God.

2. *Many appear to want a simpler, more practical and less ecclesiastical Christianity.* They find Church services dull though there is little evidence that freer and less ecclesiastical services make a greater appeal. Large regular men's meetings which were a feature in almost every denomination to some extent before the last war are now mostly things of the past.

3. We found in Leicester, and particularly this was voiced by the large representative Diocesan Committee of Laymen, a very great number of *complaints about the autocracy of the clergy and the conservatism of some congregations.* It was frequently stated in the discussions in the R.D. Conferences that "laymen are not wanted by the clergy," and that congregations do not go out of their way to welcome newcomers to the Great Fellowship. It became more serious when a member of the National Assembly complained bitterly in public of the pitiable position in which laymen find themselves in the Assembly and of the failure of the Church to implement its promises that the Enabling Act would mean a great opportunity for the laity.

4. These arguments are not strong ones but they are probably all expressive to some extent of *the disappointment and dissatisfaction left behind by the last Great War.* The pursuit of pleasure has left multitudes "fed up"—their

hearts are not satisfied. What was hoped for after the last war was "a land fit for heroes to live in" and "a decent time for decent men" and many have the idea that the Christian Church ought to have brought this about. If we fail again after this war we must not be surprised if judgment begins at the House of God.

5. *We have to face the fact that the spread of education* has not removed ignorance about religion but may have increased it. Walter Lippmann in "A Preface to Morals," pp. 12, 19, said: "This is the first age, I think, in which the circumstances of life have conspired with the intellectual habits of the time to render any fixed and authoritative belief incredible to large masses of men. . . . The irreligion of the modern world is radical to a degree for which there is, I think, no counterpart."

Education is far more secularized to-day than formerly. The authority of the Bible is commonly supposed to have been undermined. While science and philosophy are known to have disproved or rendered unnecessary, some things that were once accepted as true, men are not generally aware that philosophy and science are helping theology to re-think and re-interpret its old beliefs. Men are not sufficiently educated in religious matters to enable them to appreciate the Church's answer to modern perplexities and on the other hand their education has gone too far to enable them to be content to obey authority without question. Many of them decide to leave Christianity alone as something which is not really connected with the lives they live, the aspirations they possess and the difficulties they meet.

6. As further reasons for the alienation of men from institutional religion, *economic and social causes* are in a very, different category to those I have already mentioned, but probably more real hostility has been roused against the Church on these, than on any other grounds.

The Church is still widely condemned as the Church of a class which acquiesces in social wrongs rather than face unpopularity.

Some men feel that they must labour so hard for the meat that perishes that they have no time for religion. Others, driven by modern competition to methods of business that are doubtfully honest consider it hypocrisy to profess a religion that condemns such methods.

7. *We must place in another category the arrival of a rival faith.*

Here allow me to quote from the present Bishop of Gloucester: "Secularism as a belief in humanity stands for a point of view that, in any Christian sense, simply leaves God out. It permits indeed that sincere interest in religion which has been noted above . . . a non-credal and only mildly Christian religion . . . sufficiently vague not to commit anyone to the Way of Life which the N.T. demands, yet with enough in it to satisfy the religious instinct of mankind. It holds that "spiritual things" are uncertain; we cannot be sure what is true or whether anything is true. On the other hand the world is real or seems to be so; it is also very interesting. And so, men's minds are completely occupied with the study of the world and with maturing life—which is also something certain and definite as convenient and comfortable as may be. Science, because of its practical value; and the improvement of life are sufficient of themselves to occupy the mind of an intelligent person, and he need not trouble any further." Such views encourage a "religion of healthy mindedness"; a worship of fresh air and physical health. Motoring before the present war had opened a new world for thousands, and the disappearance of the old tradition of Sunday Observance gave the opportunity for its exercise. Any qualms of conscience are satisfied on Sundays with the music of the wireless and the gramophone and an occasional wireless service that can be "turned off" if it prove not completely satisfactory to the listener.

8. Our generation has inherited a traditional connection with the Church—a tradition which has made men anxious, for example, that their children shall not have a purely secular education—but *they are not handing on this tradition* to the generation now in its twenties, nor are they concerned that their children lack it. This, I venture to suggest, is as serious a menace as any in the present situation.

9. Two other points may help us in forming our estimate of the present situation. There are undoubtedly many men who feel that their *views on social subjects*, such as the limitation of families by artificial means, divorce and such habits as betting and gambling, are condemned by the Church. As a result they either regretfully excommunicate themselves rather than question their impression of the standards of

morality of the Church or they withdraw rather defiantly from membership in a society whose standards appear to be "behind the times."

Other men who remain outside have told me that *the Church is more concerned with its own maintenance* and about securing itself than with giving men life more abundantly. I do not believe this is true, but I often feel that indications to the contrary are not as obvious as they ought to be in our general Church life.

10. Finally, is there no truth at all in the very common plea: "I am no worse than those who go to Church?" The Clergy are all troubled by the weak lives of Church members. It is our greatest trouble. Many do not seem to live really changed lives. Here I am not thinking solely of "sudden conversion," but rather of what is meant by the "daily increase in the Holy Spirit." A great many years ago the late Bishop Gore declared that "what we need is not more Christians but better Christians." We may admit, as we do most thankfully, that in such a crisis as that which took the country by surprise regarding the monarchy, there are moral qualities in the character of the English Nation which enable us to judge soundly and behave reasonably to a degree which compels the respect of other nations. We are very thankful also that our Nation was so ready and united when the present war became a necessity. The Christian principle: "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak," was the underlying factor in determining the Nation's willingness to support the Government. The behaviour of our people in the areas exposed to enemy action is also beyond all praise. But when we have said all that can be said in praise of our people is it not true even of many inside our Churches that there is a marked decline in the need for communion with the Unseen, for God and for His worship, and also that there is a parallel decline in the sense of obligation amongst professing Christians to their religious duties and a contentment with very low standards of spiritual attainment, and "if the righteous scarcely be saved where shall the ungodly and sinners appear?" Christopher Dawson, speaking of the modern man, declares that he "has not consciously denied the Christian tradition, he has simply lost sight of it in his concentration on material progress. His loss of faith is due

not so much to a change of belief as to a change of attention—a turning away of the mind from spiritual to temporal things, which causes a blunting of the spiritual perceptions and a darkening of the soul.”

I have not indicated any remedies for the situation as regards the relationship of men to religion. But I ought, I imagine, to remind you that we have in the Church and outside it many organizations which aim at reaching or retaining men. There is the C.E.M.S.

It was widely used between 1903-14 when it found its way into 5,000 parishes. In the latter year its maximum membership was reached (131,500). Just before the present war it stood at about 25,000. The last war deprived the branches of their normal recruits over a period of at least four years, and, through the absence of men from the parishes, caused many branches to suspend their working. After the war the P.C.C.'s rendered the Society unnecessary for administrative purposes and most men, especially the younger ones, sought fellowship through organizations like Toc H, the British Legion and the like which are based on comradeship in arms. Recently the Youth Fellowship has captured some young men, but my late colleague who shared with the Bishop's Chaplain responsibility for the Diocesan Youth Fellowship told me that he had been appalled at the fewness of young men in the movement.

The Y.M.C.A., the Rover Scouts and a few scattered Men's Meetings, Clubs and Bible Classes in the parishes probably sum up the total of the Church's approach to men. The slogan of the Modern Church appears to be: "Instead of thy fathers thou shalt have children" and

"In the World's broad field of battle
In the Christian Field of Strife,
You will find the Christian soldier
Represented by his wife."

I do not think I am unduly stressing this relative paucity of men. I am sure that if we are to have a revival we must do far more than we have been doing to reach men.

Our Sunday School figures show that we are losing the children. I think it is because we have lost the men to such a large extent.

Will our Churches be equipped and ready to welcome the men after the present war?

I mention in conclusion one or two methods of approach to men which have been found helpful.

One method which is proving successful in many parishes is through the creation of a "cell" in the parish—a little group of men in close touch with the Vicar or some other leader who is training them for witness and for winning others. Some have found that grouped gatherings of men are useful. They should be from four or five parishes and should meet in a series of joint services on a week night to discuss such definite subjects as "Personal Christian Life," "The Meaning of Discipleship" and "Why men do come to Church."

Others have started a small school for Lay Witnesses who are taught "What to say" and "How to say it," while a great friend of mine keeps his laymen busy visiting for him in a new area where new people are always arriving.

We can also encourage our own men to work for the outsider in the open air in summer and through special lectures and services in the winter.

I need hardly add that I do not ask you to agree with me in all that I have written, but if you are at all satisfied that the Church's work amongst men needs to be strengthened I hope that what I have tried to write may help you to think about this matter and so assist us all to find some way of reaching more men for Christ and His Church.