

For Good or Ill?

Charlotte Wilson

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We have been speaking of the spontaneous action of human energy as a great fact, which it is foolish and dangerous to overlook or ignore. But there are two ways of accepting the existence of a fact. We may rejoice in it and welcome it as a good, or find it distasteful and repel it as an evil. We may use our conscious exercise of will to give it free play, or we may set ourselves to counteract or evade its action.

How do we look upon the spontaneous upleaping of energy in man whether it take shape in thought, feeling, or action, The common answer now-a days is, It is good or evil according to the circumstances like the manifestation of energy in fire, which we say is a good servant but a bad master. An answer characteristic of our epoch of transition, in which all vital questions are wrapped in a haze of doubt and contradiction, and the search for truth too frequently issues in the vague acceptance of a compromise.

In sturdier ages men had no such doubts to bewilder them. During those dark times when the principle of authority was strong and full of life, and reigned supreme in society, moralists and priests had no hesitation in condemning the spontaneous motions of human nature as necessarily, essentially, and entirely evil. According to the teaching of the Christian Church the heart of man was deceitful and desperately wicked. Out of it proceeded naught but cruelty and lies. All its acts were evil continually. Man of his own motion could do no good thing. "I am full of decay," moans Thomas à Kempis one of the most gifted and tender exponents of Catholicism during the ages of faith. "Fight thou strongly for me," he prays, "and vanquish the evil besets, I mean the alluring desires of the flesh." When one turns over the pages of 'The Imitation of Christ' to discover the character of these evil beasts, from whom the poor monk implores so piteously to be delivered, we find they are the healthy and natural desires of man's heart for knowledge, for human love and companionship, for personal freedom, for the esteem of his fellows, for the enjoyments of the sense, and for a share of the good things of this life. These natural impulses all war against the dreamy state of mental abstraction in an imaginary world which the monk calls the spiritual life, where, if a man desire to walk, "it is necessary that he mortify all his corrupt and inordinate affections, and that he should not earnestly cleave to any creature with particular love." The "natural man" or the "flesh," i.e., full and complete human nature, must be crushed, subdued, suppressed to make room for "grace," the good with which it may be inspired by the action of God, either directly or through the priests and lawgivers whom he has inspired to rule

the lives of their fellows.. ” Go where thou wilt,” writes A’ Kempis, ” thou shalt find no rest but in humble subjection under the government of a superior.”

The great movement towards freedom of thought, which resulted in the revolt against authority, galled the Reformation, by no means put an end to the fixed belief in the essential depravity of human nature and the need to crush out human desires and affections.

The articles of the Reformed Church of England assert of every man that he ” is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit, and therefore in every person born into this world it deserveth God’s wrath and damnation. And l this infection of nature cloth remain, yea in them that are regenerated whereby the lust of the flesh,, which some do expound the wisdom some sensuality, some the affection, some the desire of the flesh, is not subject to the law of God.”

Decidedly in the opinion of Christian churchmen and theologians the spontaneous manifestations of human energy were the workings of original sin, and the promptings of the devil.

The first practical outcome of this belief among the masses of the people was the loss of self-respect The proud Englishman, who in his heathen days had scorned to kneel before gods or men, learned to grovel in morbid self-disgust before the ascetic,, who by moral suicide had killed or perverted the healthy impulses of his own nature. Men grew to be ashamed of their true selves. Conscientious persons lived under a continual sense of guilt and humiliation, or else of self-delusion and hypocrisy, induced by a continual effort to appear what they were not. Careless and unconscious natures tended to become utterly reckless in the selfishness of their self-indulgence. Fortunately, men are continually better than their beliefs, or the Christian world would have become an actual realization of its own inhuman heaven and hell.

Another result of this strange idea of a bad nature to be destroyed that goodness might be, as it were, pumped into man’s heart from the outside, was the acceptance of coercion as a necessity. The people were taught by their masters that the evil dispositions of men must be restrained by laws made and enforced by divinely inspired priests and rulers, and by degrees this teaching took wide and deep hold of the popular mind. It lies hidden there to this day.

I do not, of course, mean that this general belief in human depravity was the cause of the authority exercised during these many ages by churchmen, aristocrats, kings, and parliament, or that it was the origin of law. It is important to recognize that it was neither. But it was the reason which was put forward, and is sometimes put forward to this day, to cloak the perverted instinct of domination run mad. It was the reason that men, who usurped authority over their fellows, gave to themselves for their unnatural conduct; the excuse they made to their own consciences, and by means of which they appealed to the moral sense of the masses whom they controlled.

Next month we will notice how this belief began to die, and its active effects to fade out of social life.

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