

THE TOWN THAT WAS MURDERED

WHATEVER his political bias, the reader will not be left unmoved by a true tale of human struggle and suffering and of a tragic failure of society for a hundred years.¹ In the present struggle of civilization we must disengage that which we have set out to defend from our share in the guilt of the common disaster. Miss Wilkinson's book must impress us anew with the evils of a capitalist society, which she traces back through one example to their beginnings in the Industrial Revolution. These evils, for which she advocates a mainly political remedy, come from as brazen-faced a rejection of Christian and human values as any that have been made. Habit and some faith in human progress and in the professions of governments have partly blinded us. But now comes the day of reckoning, when past crimes and their consequences must be paid for, even to the possible collapse of civilization and the merciless persecution of our Christianity which we have allowed to be so denied.

The history of 'the town that was murdered' suggests more than the interplay of economic and political forces. It raises the issue of human responsibility in the face of poverty and riches, the destiny of the individual caught in the stranglehold of the 'World.' The figure of the political, commercial and financial magnate haunting the pages of the book and the streets of Jarrow is not so much that of the individual capitalist; it is that of Dives, the victim not of system and fate, but of freedom and sin, and, finally, of God's avenging mercy to the poor.

It is not good for man to be possessed of that wealth which makes the gate of the kingdom narrow as the eye

¹ *The Town that was Murdered.* By Ellen Wilkinson. (Gollanz, 1939.)

of a needle. Neither is it good for him to be poor, unless he choose or accept poverty by a free and gracious act. An old woman in the Western Ukraine has been quoted by *Pravda* saying: 'Have I lived at all, I and my children? Oppression and hunger, that is not life. Rich men's rule, that is not life. But when lands and factories are handed over to the poor and it is said to them, "All this shall be yours," this is life.' Yet, for the Christian, neither may this be life.

Christianity stands to-day accused for its failure to prevent economic and social disruption. No Christian state has dealt adequately with the problem of excessive poverty and wealth. Yet the blame falls, not on Christian principles, but heavily on Christians. We know that the Christian negation of the ultimate positions of Communism should not be used to bolster up Capitalism. The cleavage between Christian and Communist does not lie in the diagnosis of material ills, nor even, necessarily, in the choice of material remedies. Reading of the inhumanity of nineteenth century capitalism, of a Lord Londonderry evicting his tenants on the plea of 'his duty to property, family, and position,' we can recognize that a divorce of responsibility and power lies at the beginning of our social order. To retrieve what is valid demands a purification, perhaps even the pangs of a new birth. The State must satisfy this claim of justice; nor can its failure to do so be supplied for by voluntary service, nor by the 'charitable rich.' The contempt shown by the Jarrow poor is a well-founded reproach. Only when the claims of justice have been met is charity set free to walk hand in hand with that poverty which, so far from being condemned, is beatified in the Gospels.

Perhaps where the Christian and Marxist doctrines are most sharply contrasted is in their attitude to the essential problem of poverty beyond and after a fairer redistribution of wealth. Consequently it is not irrelevant to consider the meaning of spiritual poverty in relation to the

social evil of economic destitution. The Communist denial of private property is to the Christian a pretty poor *ersatz* for that virtue, even on the temporal plane. So ingrained is the moral value of poverty that it runs in de-Christianized ideologies. Rousseau's 'guiltless' would have been corrupted by sharing in society's abuse of wealth. When its revolutionary strength is not that of an explosion of unconscious and dehumanized forces, the Marxist proletariat brings freedom learnt in the school of suffering and of non-participation in the unrighteousness of the possessing classes. Hence the Marxist solution is not merely the more equal distribution of economic assets, it is the forced conversion of society to an ideal of non-ownership and unpaid-for service. 'From each according to his means, to each according to his need.' The curse of possessions is thought to weigh so heavily that the conversion of the bourgeoisie is believed to be impossible even over more than one generation. But there is this great difference between the Christian and the Communist adoption of poverty. For the saint humbles himself, becomes at once a victim and hero of compassion; but the classless poor win freedom from humiliation and with an avenging purity will suffer nothing less than the extermination not only of the sin but also of all sinners against poverty.

The conscious formulations of Marxism have little to do with poverty in the Christian sense, which has no meaning without a supernaturally grounded philosophy of redemption. But what imperils our civilization is the dwindling of that concept. With the rejection of the Franciscan contribution to sociology and economics, the Christian-bourgeois misinterpretation of the text, 'the poor shall be always with you,' constitutes an acute danger. To those of easy conscience these words stand for a certain sanction of that impotence of charity and sterilization of the earth, of that 'crucifixion of money,' of which the counterpart is the martyrdom of the poor. It is not to them, as it was

to M. Mauriac's curé, 'a testimony of our sins'; nor yet is it the mysterious promise of the continued presence among us of Christ to whom we give hospitality in our hearts. Indeed, that is only to be expected. 'The Christian will never be on the level of his Christianity, will always have a tendency to take his ease too soon. Unless he is kept in sorrowful communion with all the sufferings, he is apt to make a sleeping draught of the very love he has received.'²

Nevertheless, his failure gives driving force to an indignation against Christianity itself. How can it be otherwise when beliefs blocking the way to purely human and violent means of betterment may also tempt him to dull patience? It is his tragedy that the necessary 'communion with all the suffering and the outcasts of mortal life' demands a tension above the power of human nature. Yet only that is proportionate to the superhuman destiny to which he knows himself to be called. And it would be easy for him to excuse himself, were it not that God's passion is renewed for him in the person of His poor, testifying throughout time to the more than human gravity of his failure.

But if Christianity offers no panacea for social evils short of mounting to the counsels of perfection, and certainly guarantees no earthly golden age, despair and the rejection of these counsels and their other-worldliness make nonsense of all the premises of our system and leave it to other forces better able to deal with the shambles at whatever cost to human dignity and freedom.

The human collectivity in its own natural sphere organized for the necessities and amenities of earthly life is ordained to that supernatural end for which it was made. But the depersonalization of the free, sinful, redemption-needing members of such a state, to produce a 'collective man,' whose being, purified of class or race pollution, is

² Maritain, *Integral Humanism*.

its own end, this marks the change from the Christian conception of society. In this new doctrine there is no room for the positive conception of poverty. The collective man is to be freed once and for all from the degradation and struggles of inequality and private ownership; he will be in undivided possession of the world, in unlimited enjoyment of earthly goodness, unburdened with responsibility and free from temptation against his brother—he will be his own brother through a mystical identity achieved by the joyful surrender of the willing and the annihilation of the unjust. But it is not required of him to be stripped of every claim to wealth so that naked he may give himself to God. He is not driven into the desert to learn what kingdoms there yet remain to be given up to Him. The rich young man's sorrowful answer does not tempt him to the destitution of the saints, to making himself one with the Poor, his Brother.

Unless this remains before the eyes of the Christian, his whole work suffers in whatever field he is engaged. Indeed, it may be that he can only be saved through the fiery destruction of his works. The poverty proposed to him is not liberation from the responsibility to the poor. It is the opening of the doors of his heart, the punctilious liberality that cannot bear to reserve anything, so that he is made an outcast from himself. And what is there for him to be, outside Heaven, if not a refugee like to Christ, recognizing Him in His brethren, begging and giving food and a night's rest, both in the body and the spirit?

Martyrdom is not often offered to the faithful. Yet there are times when war, famine, pestilence, bring the common man face to face with the end of the world and that sifting where only those marked by the angels can escape destruction. It may well be that this is such a time. Only a renewal of faith and a daring charity can make Christian culture and Christendom itself survive the cataclysm and deal confidently with even the earthly issues of war, peace and social reconstruction. Without such a renewal,

humanity is left torn by opposing man-made systems, equally unable to work out its salvation within an outworn social framework or through the transition to new forms. As to the need for economic and political changes, Miss Wilkinson's book is calculated to dispose of our remaining doubts. We may hope for such an outpouring of Pentecostal gifts as would make this change efficacious or possible without revolutionary chaos, but it depends not on any external force, but on every public and private, outward and inward, action of the individual, to whom God has guaranteed the fulfilment of the desire of the poor.

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