

REVIEWS

Church, State, and Economics

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism

by R.H. Tawney, Mentor Books, N.Y., originally published by Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., N.Y., 1954

"The criticism which dismisses the concern of Churches with economic relations and social organization as a modern innovation finds little support in past history. What requires explanation is not the view that these matters are part of the province of religion, but the view that they are not." (p. 228) So states the author of this book, the late, distinguished Professor R.H. Tawney, who taught economic history at Glasgow and Oxford and was a member of the British Labour Party for fifty years. This book is his explanation of how the view arose that economic and social matters are not part of the province of religion. Mr. Tawney equates that view with the idea that riches are the ultimate goal in life, and says, "Such a philosophy, plausible, militant, and not indisposed, when hard pressed, to silence criticism by persecution, may triumph or may decline. What is certain is that it is the negation of any system of thought or morals which can, except by a metaphor, be described as Christian. Compromise is as impossible between the Church of Christ and the idolatry of wealth, which is the practical religion of capitalist societies, as it was between the Church and the State idolatry of the Roman Empire." (p. 235)

What this book might have been titled, then, is Why Did Religion Allow Capitalism to Rise? The answer, according to Mr. Tawney, is to be found at least in part in the economic and political turmoil of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England--although he is loathe to explain history by either a one-sided materialistic or a one-sided "spiritual" approach. "History is a stage," he says, "where forces which

are within human control contend and cooperate with forces which are not." (p. 230)

Before discussing the background and history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious thought in England (which is what this book is concerned with in scholarly detail) it may be clarifying to establish what Mr. Tawney is referring to as "capitalism." He does not mean by the term a political system based on rights, nor does he mean a *laissez-faire* economic theory, nor does he mean a complicated industrial system based on credit and contract, though this last is perhaps closest to what he has in mind. The nearest he comes to a definition is the following:

If capitalism means the direction of industry by the owners of capital for their own pecuniary gain, and the social relationships which establish themselves between them and the wage-earning proletariat whom they control, then capitalism had existed on a grand scale both in medieval Italy and in medieval Flanders. If by the capitalistic spirit is meant the temper which is prepared to sacrifice all moral scruples to the pursuit of profit, it has been only too familiar to the saints and sages of the Middle Ages. (p.76)

This description seems so woefully inadequate, to any advocate of a society based on rights, that one is tempted to find it unrecognizable, and call the book, Religion and the Rise of What's-Its-Name. But in any case, it seems safe to agree with Tawney (whether or not we consider that this description names the essentials of capitalism) that what he is describing is both inimical to what is generally thought of as the spirit of Christianity, and is an attitude that is older than the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution.

There are, according to Professor Tawney, four attitudes which it is possible for religious opinion to adopt "toward the world of social institutions and economic relations." These are (1) an attitude of ascetic aloofness--there can be no dealing with the concerns of the world and they must be totally escaped; (2) an attitude of "indifferentism"--religion is one thing and business is another, and morality has nothing to say about economic relations; (3) an attitude of secular reform; and (4) an attitude of mingled acceptance and criticism, in which religion will "tolerate and amend, welcome the gross world of human appetites, as the squalid scaffolding from amid which the life of the spirit must rise, and insist that this also is the material of the Kingdom of God. To such a temper, all activities divorced from religion are brutal, or dead, but none are too mean to be beneath or too great to be above it, since all, in their different degrees, are touched with the spirit which permeates the whole." (p. 23) It is this attitude that Tawney finds to be most characteristic of medieval thought. In order for the search for pecuniary gain to cease being "squalid scaffolding" and to become respectable, since there is no room for any positive endorsement of economic activities in Mr. Tawney's list of possible attitudes, a change had to be made, from the general attitude described, to a general attitude of indifferentism. And it is this change which this book discusses and documents.

In the Middle Ages, religion, it was assumed, embraced all aspects of human life. This led in turn to what Tawney calls "the functional view of class organization," that is, the view that society is an organism analogous to the human body, with different classes representing different limbs or organs, and performing different functions. The lower classes (peasants and craftsmen) represented the arms and feet and did the work, the ruler was the head, and so forth. According to this view, it was as impossible for a per-

son to change his status as it would be for a foot to become a head. And according to this view, if a person was *born* rich, that was part of his function and entailed corresponding obligations. But if he *became* rich through his own efforts, he must have done it at someone else's expense, and must have tried to change his status in the bargain.

It follows that the chief social sin of the Middle Ages was avarice. Avarice led to usury, a term used to indicate, not merely the lending of money for interest, but a variety of so-called economic evils: selling goods at a profit, monopoly, charging high rents, and deviating from the established "just price." The problem was that the medieval mind could not find a place for the merchant in the established system. "Finance and trade . . . were not easily interpreted in terms of social function." (p. 28) They were necessary, of course--the papacy denounced usury but could not do without it; kings and popes used the international banking houses. A society of credit was beginning, and nothing could stop it, any more than excommunication could stop the local money-lenders. But still, the economic ethics of the time held profit as separate from honest labor, and it was suspect. Livelihood is one thing, but to medieval minds "the unpardonable sin is that of the speculator or the middleman, who snatches private gain by the exploitation of public necessities." (p. 38) This doctrine has, according to Tawney, more modern heirs. "The true descendant of the doctrines of Aquinas is the labor theory of value. The last of the Schoolmen was Karl Marx." (pp. 38-39)

What does Mr. Tawney think of the system of economic ethics whose final exponent was Karl Marx? "So merciless is the tyranny of economic appetites, so prone to self-aggrandizement the empire of economic interests, that a doctrine which confines them to their proper sphere, as the servant, not the master of civ-

ilization, may reasonably be regarded as among the pregnant truisms which are a permanent element in any sane philosophy. Nor is it, perhaps, as clear today as it seemed a century ago, that it has been an unmixed gain to substitute the criterion of economic expediency, so easily interpreted in terms of quantity and mass, for the conception of a rule of life superior to individual desires and temporary exigencies, which was what the medieval theorist meant by 'natural law.'" (p. 59) What the medieval theorist meant, and what the Marxist means, and what Tawney seems to agree with, is *political* laws enforcing "a rule of life superior to individual desires and temporary exigencies." In other words, he holds that it has perhaps been a mistake to substitute economic freedom of choice for a planned, government-regulated economy. Which is, of course, the view of the Labour Party to which he belonged.

The need that kings and popes had for bankers caused banking to thrive in the late Middle Ages, and the discovery of new lands in the Americas brought treasure to Europe. This did not seem to raise the general standard of living--on the contrary, wars broke out, and governments were poorer than before. But the bankers had prospered. This was the background against which Martin Luther challenged the power of the Catholic Church, and preached reform. But he did not, contrary to the opinion of many scholars (says Tawney), criticize the economic ethics of the Church. On the contrary, according to Tawney, Luther was attacking laxity and corruption, and was even harsher on usury than the established authorities. However, he was willing to "maintain the content of medieval social teaching, while rejecting its sanctions," (p.88) which Tawney says was not a consistent position.

After Luther came Calvin, who was to be a much stronger influence, particularly in England. Calvin lived in a time of economic complexity, relative to the med-

ieval period, and his social teaching recognized that reality. He no longer mistrusted all economic activity. Riches are not the enemy of religion, only their misuse is. Credit is normal. Possibly "the very qualities which economic success demanded--thrift, diligence, sobriety, frugality--were themselves, after all, the foundation, at least, of the Christian virtues." (p. 97) But these virtues were still charity and brotherhood in economic matters, and required community regulation and enforcement. "As both the teaching of Calvin himself, and the practice of some Calvinist communities suggest, the social ethics of the heroic age of Calvinism savored more of a collectivist dictatorship than of individualism." (p. 100)

Some historians argue that the doctrine of *laissez faire* was the result of the spread of Calvinism among the middle classes, but Tawney hastens to point out that if it did, "it did so, like tolerance, by a route which was indirect." (p. 100) To implement Calvin's social ethic, the government of Geneva became a combined Church and State, which primarily emphasized discipline. People might not gamble, swear, dress ostentatiously, and above all, engage in unregulated economic transactions. The penalties imposed were severe. A child was beheaded for striking its parents. The result of a social doctrine which made some accommodation to the moral acceptability of an economic life was thus a greater and more efficient tyranny than that practiced by the medieval church, who doubted that a man of business could be saved, and saw nothing in economic transactions but cheating and profiteering: "the struggle of wolves over carrion." (p. 23)

During the Reformation in England, the Church of England, which replaced the Catholic Church, took a position entirely consistent with the Christian view of preceding ages. However, economic conditions had changed. To those in power, it was now apparent that trade was necessary, that England needed a woolen in-

dustry, and possibly a linen industry. The view of the Church was that the government should be a "pious mercantilist," and encourage and regulate these new activities itself. But some Englishmen were more concerned with property and economic self-interest than with adhering to the teachings of the Church on economic matters. The Reformation in England was, according to Tawney, a political success but a social disaster. He puts it this way: "The upstart aristocracy of the future had their teeth in the carcass, and, having tasted blood, they were not to be whipped off by a sermon." (p. 122) Shocked churchmen realized that what they had to attack was an idea. "They sprang to the attack, less of spoliation or tyranny, than of a creed which was the parent of both. That creed was that the individual is absolute master of his own, and, within the limits set by positive law, may exploit it with a single eye to his pecuniary advantage, unrestrained by any obligation to postpone his own profit to the well-being of his neighbors, or to give account of his actions to a higher authority. It was, in short, the theory of property which was later to be accepted by all civilized communities." (pp. 125-126) Against this, the Church of England invoked the concept of property which had been held by the Schoolmen (and later, as Tawney points out, by Karl Marx), that the use of property "was limited at every turn by the rights of the community and the obligations of charity." (p. 127) Usury was still dealt with by ecclesiastical courts, which also did such things as "punishing the man who refused to 'pay the poor men's box.'" (p. 138) And the Tudor Privy Councils established an elaborate system of economic controls. "Wages, the movement of labor, the entry into a trade, dealings in grain and in wool, methods of cultivation, methods of manufacture, foreign exchange business, rates of interest--all are controlled, partly by Statute, but still more by the administrative activity of the Council." (p. 142)

So we see that the first wave of the Reformation left

untouched the medieval approach to economic ethics, although accommodations were made to increasing economic activity. Where in medieval times the Church controlled and punished most economic crimes directly, the economy now became more a matter of State control--albeit State control with strong religious overtones. "The history of the rise of individual liberty--to use a question-begging phrase--in economic affairs," writes Tawney, "follows somewhat the same course as does its growth in the more important sphere of religion, and is not unconnected with it. The conception of religion as a thing private and individual does not emerge until after a century in which religious freedom normally means the freedom of the State to prescribe religion, not the freedom of the individual to worship God as he pleases. The assertion of economic liberty as a natural right comes at the close of a period in which . . . the supernatural sanction had been increasingly merged in doctrines based on reasons of state and public expediency." (p. 149)

The Elizabethan age was an age of economic expansion. Foreign trade, banking, investment in textiles and mining all led to an almost modern money-market. And people were becoming economic individualists "without the formal enunciation of any theory of economic individualism." (p. 151) They disliked government price-fixing, and they were formulating a political approach to the sanctity of property. "By the seventeenth century, a significant revolution had taken place. 'Nature' had come to connote, not divine ordinance, but human appetites, and natural rights were invoked by the individualism of the age as a reason why self-interest should be given free play." (pp. 152-53) The State began to reverse its economic policies. The Church offered little guidance for new problems. And indifferentism, the theoretic separation of Church and economics, began to arise.

And against this background, the Puritans arose. Early

Puritans held, as strongly as did the varieties of Christianity that preceded them, that faith implies certain ethical standards, that business should be a public service, that property primarily entailed obligations. They did not rush to the idea that business is business and is none of religion's business. But the power of the State was not yet theirs, and therefore they resented the existing enforcement of beliefs which in principle they agreed with. "The transition from the idea of a moral code enforced by the Church, which had been characteristic of early Calvinism, to the economic individualism of the later Puritan movement took place, in fact, by way of the democratic agitation of the Independents." (p. 182)

But even this was by default. "The capitalist spirit," writes Tawney, "is as old as history, and was not, as has sometimes been said, the offspring of Puritanism. But it found in certain aspects of later Puritanism a tonic which braced its energies and fortified its already vigorous temper. At first sight no contrast could be more violent than that between the iron collectivism, the almost military discipline, the remorseless and violent rigors practiced in Calvin's Geneva, and preached elsewhere, if in a milder form, by his disciples, and the impatient rejection of all traditional restrictions on economic enterprise which was the temper of the English business world after the Civil War. . . . Like traits of individual character which are suppressed till the approach of maturity releases them, the tendencies in Puritanism, which were to make it later a potent ally of the movement against the control of economic relations in the name either of social morality or the public interest did not reveal themselves till political and economic changes had prepared a congenial environment for their growth." (pp. 188-189)

The Puritan, according to Tawney, "sacrificed fraternity to liberty." (p. 191) He derived from his sense

of responsibility for his own soul a theory of individual rights, and he admired business enterprise as being in the service of God and considered poverty an indication of moral failure. This made him susceptible to influence by political theories which were then developing, theories which were soon to reach their final formulation in the political writings of John Locke. The Puritans had a brief fling with power under Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, but when it was overthrown they were returned to the position of dissenting minority and the collectivistic elements which they had inherited from Calvin dropped away. Finally, "Individualism in religion led insensibly, if not quite logically, to an individualist morality, and an individualist morality to a disparagement of the significance of the social fabric as compared with personal character." (p. 211)

Tawney ends his discussion of the Puritan Movement with an account of the doleful effect of what he considers the abandonment of idealism to money-making in the treatment of the English poor. No longer was charity a virtue--beggars were whipped, vagrants were put to work, the Elizabethan Poor Law remained in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an inadequate stop-gap, originally conceived but as the last link in a chain of brotherly measures which also included the prevention of evictions and price control, also aimed at preventing poverty. He tells us that pauperism increased between 1640 and 1660, and implies that it perhaps continued to do so in succeeding centuries, as if nineteenth-century England were manifestly less populated and poorer than Elizabethan England. He even tells us that "Bishop Berkeley, with the conditions of Ireland before his eyes, suggested that 'sturdy beggars should . . . be seized and made slaves to the public for a certain term of years,'" and adds, "When philanthropists were inquiring whether it might not be desirable to re-establish slavery, it was not to be expected

that the sufferings of the destitute would wring their hearts with social compunction." (p. 224) All of this is to indicate the evil consequences which befell from the separation of religion and economics.

But were the consequences so evil? It is easy to establish that nineteenth-century England was in fact vastly more prosperous, healthier, and more populous than the England of two or three centuries earlier. Many more people survived, the average life expectancy was increased, and the poor were certainly no poorer than they had been in the past. Why then would a scholar like Tawney be so concerned with the remaining poor's condition that he sounds at times as if he is tempted to turn back the clock to the Middle Ages, where, at least, for all the lack of progress, "the denunciation of vices implies that they are recognized as vicious"? (p.33) Why do Tawney, and men like him, consider the Middle Ages in some sense superior to ages obviously richer, more sanitary, and with more hope, mobility, and opportunity for those at the bottom of the scale? Tawney gives just a hint of what the answer might be.

"In the little communities of peasants and craftsmen which composed medieval England," he says, "all, when Heaven sent a bad harvest, had starved together, and the misery of the sick, the orphan and the aged had appeared as a personal calamity, not a social problem." (p. 216) What this implies is that the element to be resented is not that the poor were poorer (which was not true), but that the rich were richer. If one person starves, all should starve; it is not a cause for rejoicing that only one starves now where ten did yesterday, it is a reproach. If five men are trapped in a pit and they huddle together until they die, this is ethical; this is the brotherhood of the Middle Ages. But if one man should manage to climb out, he is because

of that very fact considered a monster. He should presumably starve with his brothers.

It is interesting in this respect to notice Tawney's scorn of individualism. He is not saying merely, as other opponents of capitalism have said, that the individual should not survive at the *expense* of his fellows, and that that is what capitalism will lead to. Tawney is saying that the individual has no right to survive *without* his brothers, even if his downfall could not benefit them at all.

One can derive from this an attitude toward property which would be logically consistent--nobody should have any property until everyone has. And that in fact seems also to be Tawney's position. The individualistic concept of ownership, he says, "denied both the existence and the necessity of a moral title. . . . Once accepted, it was to silence the preaching of all social duties save that of submission. If property be an unconditional right, emphasis on its obligations is little more than the graceful parade of a flattering, but innocuous, metaphor. For, whether the obligations are fulfilled or neglected, the right continues unchallenged and infeasible." (p. 127)

Advocates of a secular political theory based on the rights of man may well take a long look at the ethics involved in hating a man merely for being safer and happier than all of his ancestors were, and than some of his contemporaries are. If Christianity requires that we all huddle in a pit, perhaps it is capitalism that must be indifferent to Christianity, and not vice versa.

--Joan Kennedy Taylor

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