

POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

By Frederick Ryan.

From *Dana*, May 1904.

More than one recent incident has set up the fear in many minds that Ireland is about to experience another attack of that religious fever which has so often afflicted her in the past, at a time when other indications go to show that saner and more pacific ideals are gaining in strength. We continually suffer in Ireland from rival bigotries which, so far from injuring, positively help one another and stimulate each other. There is, firstly, the Orange and ascendancy party, continually waging a political war against the people and against the policy of self-government which is the chief cure for Orange and Catholic bigotry alike. That Orange party, with the vices which peculiarly attach to every such faction, maintained by outside political support and kept in countenance by outside authority, actuated by base and bigoted ideas, has the strength which all such minorities possess. It is comparatively compact, unimaginative, self-centred. Its boycott, of course, is chiefly political, but it also tends to set up a counter bigotry on the other side. That is the fate of all countries so situated as Ireland. The vices of the dominant faction, ruling without consent and without sympathy, corrupt the whole body politic, so that in such a soil race and religious passion waxes strong, and political science is at a discount.

This seems to me the simple explanation of such incidents as the campaign started some time ago by a weekly Dublin journal to accentuate and embitter Catholic feeling, to make Catholics particularly sensitive as to their Catholicism, and to urge them to demand rights, not as citizens, nor in the interests of national well-being, but to demand them as Catholics in the interests of Catholicity. This campaign, it is true, is carried on at a level of vulgarity and with a wealth of epithet that might excite the envy of Mr. Chamberlain, and is of that 'will-you-take-it-lying-down' order which peculiarly appeals

to the uneducated and semi-educated mob, since it touches that natural and even healthy egoism which lies so near the surface in any crowd. The formula of that mob-appeal is now fairly familiar to most of us. When England, with a quarter of a million of men, set out to conquer two little peasant States in South Africa, the English Jingo politicians and journals appealed to the English mob in a fashion that would lead an observer to imagine that they were fighting a desperate battle for their very existence against tremendous odds.

A case by which the ethical standard of the leaders of this Catholic campaign might be tested arose in the matter of the anti-Jewish outburst in Limerick. An ignorant priest in Limerick preached a sermon retailing old and exploded libels against Jews in general, and urging the people to boycott the Jews in Limerick, a sermon which, by the way, evoked a humane and admirable protest from Mr. Michael Davitt, one of the many incidents which justified the high place he held in the esteem of Irish democrats. What was the conduct of those who are so loud in their demand for 'justice' to Catholics? They supported the priest. When Catholics are boycotted it is an outrageous injustice; when Catholics boycott others it is all right and proper, being merely a process of recovering their own. On many to whom this conduct appears defensible, probably nothing that is here written will have any effect. But to others the question may be put: on what principle is any lawless egoism to be condemned, if this be justified?

At the same time I would like to here record my conviction that the spirit of political exclusiveness and sectarian bigotry on the Catholic side, such as it is, does not in any respect equal that on the Protestant side, nor does any conduct on the part of Irish Catholics known to me compare with, say, the persistent and continuous boycott of Catholics in the matter of civic employment in Protestant Belfast. It is even doubtful whether the intolerant clericalist campaign before referred to commands any large support amongst lay Catholics themselves.

Let us, however, seek a clear intellectual outlook. Logically, of course, the conduct of the religionists all round is absurd. According to the Christian view, this world is a 'vale of tears,' a vestibule of eternity, a mere halting place on a road that stretches into the

illimitable future. Yet amongst the people who profess this belief, the fight is waged with a bitterness which seems to suggest that the combatants are determined to stay in the 'vestibule' as long as they can, and to devote all their energy to making it as comfortable, in the meantime, as possible. The contrast between precept and practice here is certainly amusing. Yet far be it from me to press the old precepts on the various combatants. The only modern Christian to profess the doctrine of non-resistance is Count Tolstoy, and even with him it is only a profession since he maintains a continuous and vigorous propaganda against what he considers the evils of modern society. Indeed his English admirers keep up a supply of books, pamphlets, and leaflets from his pen in such bewildering profusion that one never knows exactly whether one is reading a new pronouncement or merely a new edition of an old one.

Yet Tolstoy's example surely sets us on the right path. The method of redressing the sectarian bitterness in Ireland is not by counter bitterness. We shall never cure matters by boycotting, by intimidation, or by abuse. It is by science and by moral appeal that progress is always to be permanently won. The first and absolutely necessary step is the winning of self-government. And it is the failure to recognise this that vitiates otherwise capable surveys like Mr. Filson Young's and Sir Horace Plunkett's. Indeed the latter book, in this respect, considering its title and pretensions, is almost rendered worthless. A man sets out to describe the condition of a patient suffering from cancer, and the one thing he will not discuss is—cancer. He will dispassionately and even illuminatingly discuss every by-effect of the malady, but he is ignorant of the fact of the malady itself, or else is professionally precluded from dealing with it. For most of the evils that many recent writers discuss have their proximate cause in the lack of political wisdom. And the only road to political wisdom is by way of political responsibility. A people long suffering from political servitude have the vices of slavery, lack of constructive political faculty, lack of initiative, lack of the wise compromise that comes of action; though notwithstanding these defects the Irish people, on the whole, have shown at the least as much political sagacity as the English.

But to recognise and proclaim these things does not by any means preclude the right or the propriety of internal criticism. Rather does that criticism come the more appropriately from those who are alive to the main political evil. And whilst demanding the redress of that evil, it becomes necessary, concurrently, to raise our own canons of conduct and scrutinise our own standards of thinking. Sir Horace Plunkett in one passage in his book observes:—

‘The revolution in the industrial order, and its consequences, such as the concentration of immense populations within restricted areas, have brought with them social and moral evils that must be met with new weapons. In the interests of religion itself, principles first expounded to a Syrian community with the most elementary physical needs and the simplest of avocations, have to be taught in their application to the conditions of the most complex social organisation and economic life. Taking people as we find them, it may be said with truth that their lives must be wholesome before they can be holy; and while a voluntary asceticism may have its justification, it behoves a Church to see that its members, while justly acknowledging the claims of another life, should develop the qualities which make for well-being in this life.’¹

Some of us, of course, might cavil at Sir Horace's implication that it is possible to really combine concern for ‘another life’ with effective regard for the well-being of this. The essential business of the Churches all round and the essence of the Church ideal is to prepare men for the ‘hereafter’, and the affairs of this world are only treated as incidental to such preparation. The true logical antithesis of this view is the positivist and scientific ideal which, taking humanity as the highest we know, regards the well-being of humanity here as the greatest end for which we can work, and frankly accepting the fact that this life is the only one of which we have real knowledge, ignores all distracting hypotheses.

None the less, however, is it well and courageous for Sir Horace to put the secular ideal in his own words and fashion. It is easy for the popular Press to sneer at him on this score, for it is sure of a response from the religious multitude. But it is precisely in a country where the ‘principles’ of ‘Syria,’ to use Sir Horace Plunkett’s euphemism, are professed on all sides with a heartiness almost unknown elsewhere,

¹ ‘Ireland in the New Century,’ pp. 103-104.

that we have the eternal sectarian wrangles, here over the creed of a dispensary doctor or an inspector of schools, there over the religion of an unfortunate foundling, who may be 'damned' without its knowledge by the votes of a board of guardians consisting for the most part of publicans and slum-owners.

One would on first thoughts conclude that the spectacle of such sectarian squabbling would perforce raise in an ordinarily intelligent people doubts of the genuineness of the creeds that could stimulate it. But such is not the case; it seems to require a definitely humanist philosophy and a humanitarian enthusiasm to realise that the welfare of humanity as such is the greatest and noblest end for which humanity can work. But humanity in Ireland has not yet come into its inheritance. In a review of Mr. Filson Young's book, *Ireland at the Cross Roads*, the Rev. Dr. McDonald, in an article in the *Freeman's Journal*, wrote: 'Consider the real Ireland too. In that sad country one thing only has prospered, as Mr. Young admits—the Church; and she is based on a system of almost absolute self-government.' So far as Dr. McDonald intended this as an argument for self-government, as against Mr. Young, I am with him. But he does not seem to have realised the ominous significance of his point. The Church has flourished amidst universal decay. Precisely.

In a country warped and injured by lack of political freedom, it would be curious if intellectual freedom prospered. The Irish people, trampled by alien and unsympathetic rule, have looked with aching eyes to a heaven of bliss, and they have, more or less apathetically lain down in their chains, soothed by the hope of after-reward. If Ireland is to be saved we must surely change all that; the people must turn their energies from dreaming of another world to the task of bettering and beautifying the things of this. It is nobler to make a happy human home than to raise a dozen granite temples for a worship which does not need them; it is a greater thing to rescue one human heart from despair than to have kept every letter of the religious law. We need in Ireland a spirit of intellectual freedom, and a recognition of the supremacy of humanity. And so far from this prescription being offered as a substitute for national freedom it is urged as a necessity of a true national ideal. For the synthesis of much recent criticism is this:

intellectual freedom and political freedom are not opposites. Rightly understood, intellectual freedom and political freedom are one.