LAMBETH CONFERENCE REVIEWS

III.—PROBLEMS OF MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL MORALITY

LAMBETH CONFERENCE, 1920. RESOLUTIONS 66, 67, 68, 69, 70. PEOPLE of the English-speaking Church, and many others not belonging to her communion, have received welcome assistance from the Report of the Lambeth Conference, 1920.

Among the many problems agitating the nation at the present time there are none more important, none more eagerly debated, than those which concern marriage and sexual morality. It is a hopeful symptom in the body politic that these problems are being widely discussed and that a general expectation existed of a definite lead on the part of the Conference. The worst enemy of all is indifference; the most deadly symptom of disease is failure of vitality; and amongst much that is painful and even dangerous in our present spiritual and moral condition, the general and deep interest taken in the problems of marriage and of sexual morality is both a possible means of reviving vitality, and also a sign that we are surely not dead but sleeping.

In Resolution 66 the Conference recognizes the possibility and the obligation of universal chastity and purity. It holds up this standard as binding on men, as well as on women.

The dual standard of morality accepted by public opinion and recognized by law is not the standard of nature nor of God. Naturally men are capable of continence and self-control, but these duties have been made more difficult for them by long-continued self-indulgence, condoned and even approved by public opinion. The fear of bastardy and the visible inconveniences of immorality in the case of the woman have had the effect of an outside conscience defending her virtue and strengthening her powers of self-control; whereas in the case of the man lapses from virtue and absence of purity formed no bar to honourable matrimony, and parents were only too ready to give their daughter in marriage to a man who was known to be immoral if his other circumstances were desirable. The natural result has been over-cultivation of the man's sexual nature, and a greatly increased difficulty in dealing with it.

Doctors must bear their share of blame in this matter, for they have frequently assented to the proposition that sexual intercourse is essential to the wellbeing of a man, though they never ventured to say that it was requisite for a woman. At the present time there are very few doctors who advise in this sense, and the evidence given by them before the Royal Commission on the Venereal Diseases and before the Birth-Rate Commissions was practically unanimous, to the effect that continence is practicable for all men; that no injury

to health or to virility is caused by continence; and that incontinence before marriage, and unchastity after marriage, are likely to be followed by infection with the venereal diseases.

In Resolution 67 "the Conference affirms as our Lord's principle and standard of marriage a lifelong and indissoluble union, for better for worse, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, and calls on all Christian people to maintain and bear witness to this standard."

This is a short, clear, and fearless statement of the Christian law of marriage—a union between one man and one woman, lifelong and indissoluble. There is no question here of divorce being justified to suit the convenience of people who have married without due consideration, and without sufficient investigation into the character and the health, bodily and mental, of the proposed partner. In the Committee's Report on which the Resolution is founded, stress is laid on the importance of a right preparation for marriage, for an increased dignity of courtship and betrothal, and on the instruction that should be given to young people on the care of their bodies, the wise regulation of their functions, and on the share that parents, teachers, and clergy should take in the moral instruction of the young. They are more especially urged to help by placing courtship, betrothal, and marriage on a higher plane of dignity. Probably the revival of the old ceremony of betrothal and the observance of some time of probation between betrothal and marriage would be helpful, by affording opportunity for better mutual knowledge, and of investigation by parents as to the general suitability of health, morals, and circumstances.

The second clause of Resolution 67 admits the right of churches within the Anglican Communion to deal with cases of divorce in consequence of adultery on the part of one of the partners to the union. This admission is probably inevitable; for it may be contended that the erring partner has already broken the union, and that the case is covered by our Lord's words, as recorded by St. Matthew (v. 32, and xix. 9). All the same it is to be regretted, the remarriage of the innocent party automatically shutting out the guilty from full repentance—repentance consisting of contrition, confession, absolution, and reparation—which last element is rendered impossible by the remarriage of the innocent party.

This, then—the cause of adultery—is the single ground of divorce contemplated by the Conference. Other alleged causes, such as insanity, prolonged imprisonment, and desertion, are not even referred to. The Committee (p. 111) submitted that "no compassion for present hardships in particular cases can justify the lowering for all of the standard of Christ, which alone insures the welfare of society and of the race."

People who advocate divorce for insanity, crime, desertion, and other lesser reasons, do not, apparently, consider the injury inflicted by divorce on the partners to the union, their children, and the State. They believe that freedom from the heavy burden of an uncongenial or impossible partner is clear gain, and they do not take into consideration the hardship on the other partner who may recover from illness, who will, in time, be set free from prison, and who may repent of desertion, or whose supposed desertion may have been involuntary detention. Enough weight is not given by the public to the position of the partner divorced against his or her will; still less is the injury to the children adequately considered. Each child has a right to the care and love of both its parents, and imperfect as they may be they are capable of amendment, and few, indeed, are they who have not some value to their children. The re-marriage of the divorced couple tends to bring confusion and divided interests into a family—such a family may consist of at least three sets of children: those of the man by his former wife, those of the woman by her former husband, and the children of the second marriage. Greater complications are not uncommon where people may be divorced two or three times, as in Sweden and some of the States of America.

Access to divorce is already too easy, and although neither sex nor expense should come into the question, increased facilities can only lead to increased laxity of morals, to depreciation of the honour in which marriage should be held, and to the undermining of the foundations of the State.

In the third clause of Section 67 the Conference acknowledged the difficulty of the State in framing laws which must bind all its subjects, Christian and non-Christian. This difficulty was also felt by the Committee, which suggested that if no better plan could be devised a possible solution is universal civil marriage, followed by the solemnization of the contract by the Church in the case of those couples who desire it. This arrangement would relieve the clergy from going through the solemn farce of reading the marriage service on behalf of people who look on it only as a social function, who do not sincerely seek the Divine blessing, and who have no intention of ordering their lives in accordance with its admonitions. This solution may be the only one practicable, but it presents much difficulty in its working. At home it would open up invidious questions. So great is the force of custom that many non-Christian couples wish to be married in church, to have their children baptized in church, and to be buried in the churchyard. This is the outcome of custom and fetichism at home and would probably give rise to much trouble. In some parts of the foreign field civil marriage divorced from religious ceremony would be a cause of grave scandal, not only to native Christians, but to our heathen fellow-citizens, who are all

imbued with strong, albeit imperfect and erroneous religious beliefs, and who are shocked to find professing Christians unmindful of the laws of their religion.

Section 68 of the Resolution of the Conference deals with the difficult subject of voluntary restriction of the birth-rate.

The Bishops did not lay down rules to meet every abnormal case, but they uttered "an emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of conception," and they emphasized the grave dangers—physical, moral, and religious—thereby incurred, and . . . the evils with which the extension of such use threatens the race." On this subject the Committee said it was aware "that many persons of undoubted sincerity, whose opinions are entitled to respect . . . consider the whole matter as chiefly a question of expediency to be determined on medical, financial, and social grounds. This contention we cannot admit, as we believe that the question cannot be separated from the moral and religious issues involved."

The Committee might have gone further and considered that so far as medical grounds are concerned, there is much division of medical opinion, and that many doctors of great and long experience believe that worse harm is done to the wife by the use of contraceptives than by the acceptance of a natural family. From the nature of the case no statistics can be offered on either side, but there is a considerable mass of observation and experience which goes far to justify the belief that nervous breakdowns are more common among women who are deliberately thwarting the functions of their nature.

The practice of the voluntary limitation of conception began with the better educated classes, and has extended to the wage-earners. So widespread is the practice, and so dependent is it on the economic position of the family, that the number of children in a family appears to be governed chiefly by the amount earned, and by the desire of the parents to secure easier circumstances for themselves and their offspring. Thus the restriction affects chiefly those who are best able to maintain a family.

The influence of Church teaching and Church discipline is shown in the amount of limitation practised by the members of different Churches. The Jews maintain their old fertility approved and enforced by their religion, and the Roman Catholics whose priests teach them that voluntary restriction is wrong have a birth-rate of 6·6 per 1,000 against a general birth-rate of 3·3 per 1,000 for England and Wales.

The question of the birth-rate and of its limitation is a difficult one—some women are very fertile and apt to have children at too short intervals. This is bad for their health, and bad for the family as a whole. The woman who has three children under four years of age is likely to be very overburdened, and to be unable to give the time

and energy that are essential to the children's best development. The man who has a large family is compelled to work harder and longer than the man who has one or two children only. He also finds it more difficult to obtain house-room and sometimes employment.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that if men and women were not so badly *over sexed*, as they have been trained to be, the "natural family" would be one that could be well maintained, and that would not make undue demands on the parents.

Prudence in marital relations, abstaining by mutual consent for a time, and the fulfilment by the mother of the natural function of lactation, would probably result in a moderate family, which would confer happiness and moral worth on its parents.

From the national or imperial point of view, while Canada and Australia have an average of about one citizen to each square mile, we need not fear over-population, and the State should be able to adjust taxation so as to help the man who presents it with a reasonable number of children. In this connection must be mentioned the proposals for the Endowment of Motherhood, whereby a woman would receive 5s. a week for her first child, and 3s. 6d. weekly for each succeeding child until the youngest reached the age of five years.

In Section 69 of its Resolutions the Conference glances at the enormous subject of the prevalence, incidence, and causes of the venereal diseases, and at the measures proposed for their prevention and cure. These diseases are the cause of a heavy percentage of ante-natal mortality, and are responsible for a large share of the mortality of infants under the age of one year. They cause more than half the blindness, a third of the deafness of the young, one-sixth of all the insanity in the country, and about half of the sterility and half of the idiocy and feeble-mindedness. Anything that can be done to prevent and to cure these diseases is a national duty. The Conference therefore "supports all efforts which are consistent with high moral standards to check the causes of the diseases. . . . We impress upon the clergy and members of the Church the duty of joining with physicians and public authorities in meeting this scourge," but "the Conference must condemn the distribution or use, before exposure to infection, of so-called prophylactics, since these cannot but be regarded as an invitation to vice." This last sentence was a direct quotation by the Bishops who drew up and passed the Resolution from the report of the Committee of Bishops who were appointed to consider moral problems.

In Section 70 immediately following on this pronouncement, the Conference wisely urges various measures whereby the moral tone of the nation, and especially of the young people of the nation, may be raised to a higher plane. The Bishops urge all men and women of goodwill to co-operate with, and to stimulate, public authorities in the suppression of "such incentives to vice as indecent literature,

suggestive plays and films, the open or secret sale of contraceptives, and the continued existence of brothels." Further, in Section 71, the Conference emphasizes the duty of parents to deal honestly with their children by imparting to them a dignified and pure knowledge of the facts of life and of sexual hygiene, so as to guard them from acquiring distorted, vulgarized, and shameful information from those who seek to corrupt their youth.

In this connection the Committee urged "the wise and firm administration of laws relating to street solicitation, both by men and women; the safeguarding of decency in parks and other places of public recreation; the employment of women police; and the raising of the age of consent to eighteen." Probably had the Committee and Conference known that women magistrates were to be appointed, they would have welcomed them as being likely to be of service in the many cases of sexual offences brought into the Magistrates' Courts.

Lastly, in Section 72 of the Resolutions, the Conference "deplores the common apathy of Church-people in regard to Preventive and Rescue Work, and urges on Bishops, Clergy, and all Christian people the duty of taking a more active share in this essential part of the Church's life." The report of the Committee on this point is particularly full and helpful. One cannot but recognize in it the influence of the chairman, the Bishop of London. He is an enthusiast in this most necessary and sacred mission for the comfort of the sorrowful and the restoration of those who are lost. A sentence or two may be quoted—"In the case of those who have sinned methods of repression are largely discredited. It is recognized that the beauty and happiness of a Christian life should be put before them, . . . along with the discipline which is needed for building the character . . . more thought should be given to the building up of pure manhood and womanhood, whereby both God will be glorified and the Commonwealth be served."

Practically enough, and characteristically, the Committee's report closes with a suggestion "that some form of Public Morality Council, by whatever name it may be called, may be established in every large city, with local branches to deal with the ever-varying local forms of evil."

The whole section of Resolutions and the whole of the Committee's Report should be carefully and prayerfully studied by all "who are set in authority," by all our "Pastors and Masters," by all men and women of goodwill; by all who are prepared to live and to die "for God and the Empire," by all who feel with Blake—

"I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land."

MARY SCHARLIEB.