

MEDIEVAL ECONOMICS*

ADMIRABLE in its tone and temper, entirely lucid in statement, and very thorough in its examination of the writings relative to the subject, the value of Dr. O'Brien's work, as a contribution to our knowledge of Catholic teaching in the Middle Ages, can hardly be rated too highly. The value is the greater to-day when the minds of many, their hearts perturbed by the strife of capital and labour, are turned to the ages of faith for light and guidance.

What was the Christian teaching in the Middle Ages on the economic relations of man to man? Wherein did it differ from the political economy taught in schools and colleges in the nineteenth century?

The first thing to note is that scientific economics as such were unknown to the great medieval teachers, for whom economics did not exist as a separate study. Much was written on labour, property, usury, and trade; but all these things were subject to the laws of justice and charity, and the economic relations of man to man were governed by the Christian teaching on morals. Our modern political economy is something entirely different from this, for it distinctly and definitely excludes the moral question. It is primarily concerned with the methods of wealth production, and declares wealth to consist in material things that will find a purchaser in the market. In spite of protests against this modern political economy, voiced eloquently and clearly by Ruskin and others, Catholics in England, with the mass of their fellows generally, accepted the current economic teaching, knowing no better, and it is only in quite recent years that we have been awakened to the knowledge that the shame of child-labour in fields and factories, the rack-renting of

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the slums, the sweating of working women, the whole business, in short, of buying cheap to sell dear, and of contriving to live on the labour of others without working, so far from having Christian sanction is utterly repugnant to Catholic morals.

Against the political economy of capitalism, with its complete unconcern for the temporal health and eternal salvation of man, its denial of room for faith and morals in commercial dealings, and its false and inadequate philosophy of money-making as an end, we place the principles of Christian economics set out by St. Thomas Aquinas, and from this book of Dr. O'Brien's find haply some help to right thinking and just living. For while economic conditions change, as political constitutions change, with the centuries, and many customs and habits once thought permanent dissolve and crumble with the passage of years, the eternal laws of justice and charity remain, and the Catholic Church remains—the interpreter of these laws.

One clear right is declared for man—the right to live. Be he bond or free (St. Thomas and the medievalists are no more troubled by the existence of slavery than St. Paul was), be he lord or villein, be he capitalist or workman, as a Christian he belongs to God, body and soul, and his talents and vocation are to be used *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. St. Thomas may not contemplate the abolition of slavery and serfdom, but it is quite plain to him that the Christian teaching does not allow slave or serf to be denied the full exercise of gifts implanted by God, or the child of serf or slave to be excluded from the highest offices in the Church. Equally plain is it that such property as pertains to man's personal well-being may be justly held. Men may voluntarily resign lands and goods and adopt a life of poverty in solitude or in community. The State may, if it so wills, declare the nationalization of

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necessities for the sake of the commonwealth, as it may decide that tramways shall be municipalized, or an empire become a republic. But there is no foundation in history for the notion that the Christian teaching favours socialism more than feudalism, prefers peasant proprietorship to co-operative agriculture, or looks askance at experiments in communal ownership. Provided always that justice be done and charity be not violated, Christian men are free to nationalize the natural sources of wealth or to keep the land in private ownership. The limits of collective management and state ownership and control will be found to vary with national habits, climate, and industrial development.

Certain modern propositions are utterly foreign to the Christian teaching of the Middle Ages.

(1) That the interference of the State in trade, commerce, in questions of buying and selling, and in personal conduct should not be allowed.

The medieval State not only regulated conditions between purchaser and seller, endeavoured to prohibit money-lending, and to establish a just price for goods sold in the market ; it required the serf and the villein to labour for their respective lords, from time to time imposed sumptuary laws deciding details of dress for the various orders of people, and generally undertook very wide responsibilities. Theologians of the Middle Ages, far from agitating against this State interference and protesting against the compulsion of a " Servile State," are mainly anxious to lay down the principles which shall guide the State in its interference. A State that did not interfere between man and man and was not concerned with the welfare of the whole community is not within the vision of the medieval writers.

(2) That to live, without working, by the labour of others is desirable and respectable.

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According to the Christian mind of the Middle Ages this proposition was quite false. The social discredit cast on all manual labour by the pagans of the Roman Empire was challenged from the first by Christianity. The religious orders with their insistence on manual labour renewed with fresh dignity the workman's life. The admission of the money-lender and money-changer, and of the mere trader who bought and sold without producing, to Christian society was long delayed. What useful service did such render to the community in return for the goods they received? The mere possession of wealth gave no title to respectability in a Christian community; since much wealth was acquired by robbery, extortion and other unjust devices, and great services rendered without reward in money. (But the paganism of fashionable society has never given up the belief that to live without labouring is highly respectable.)

(3) That since labour is the source of all wealth the labourer should receive the whole product of his toil.

This contention of the Socialist, with its further amendment that the labouring class should possess the whole power of sovereignty in the nation, of course runs counter to the Christian teaching of the Middle Ages. In the late fourteenth century, with the Peasant Revolt, the doctrine of social equality is proclaimed by John Ball and other rebel leaders, but the stability of medieval social life was in its ordered ranks. Serf and slave, king and emperor, each had his place; and if it was from the toil of the labourer the magnificence of the prince was derived; it is never questioned in the writings of the Schoolmen that the prince has other than honest title to the wealth he enjoys. Always provided the needs of the labourer and his family are satisfied as justice and charity demand.

The total disappearance of all private property has at no time been contemplated by the Christian Church,

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a fact which may be understood by the importance at all times attached to the giving of alms by the faithful.

The production of goods being a comparatively simple matter in the Middle Ages, uncomplicated by a multitude of mechanical contrivances and a foreign trade of world-wide dimensions, the doctors of the Church laid stress on the distribution of goods, and the duty of Christian men to see that this distribution was justly made.

In our examination of Dr. O'Brien's valuable study, and current economic teaching, this must be remembered: a common faith, a common outlook on life, and a common acknowledgment of authority in all social relations and commercial morality characterized the Middle Ages. Men fell short of the counsels of God, they cheated, robbed, murdered, and were cruel, avaricious, and envious in the Middle Ages, as at other times; but they did not pretend that evil was good and good was evil, that right and wrong were matters of private fancy, and that any scheme that brought in money was permissible to Christians and acceptable in the sight of God.

The peculiar misfortune of our age has been the denial in economics of a common good and the substitution of a reckless pursuit of riches for the earlier following of justice. The modern textbooks of the schools, the works of Mill, Marshall, and their disciples, offer no healing for the economic ills of nations. Dr. O'Brien shows us that St. Thomas Aquinas enlightened the Middle Ages, and that the light he kindled still burns steadily to-day for all who seek the Kingdom of God.

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