

MEN OR INSTITUTIONS: COMMENT AND CRITICISM

The article on "Men or Institutions," by Professor Shailer Mathews, is a clarifying discussion in an opportune time. It strikes a clear note and keeps in the open. This is made possible by sure footing on a fundamental principle: man is the supreme mundane value; all else is tributary. Here is axiomatic substructure on which the logic of life may build.

Institutions are among the more substantial methods of serving man. At their best, they represent the best thinking of the day. But men grow to larger thought by experience. The larger thinking comes to be shared by others. Institutions must correspondingly change in method and conceptions, or they become a hindrance, block the path of the soul reaching forward to its ideal.

The conservative does not like to be jostled out of his accustomed ways. In some instances he is tired of life's perpetual struggle and wishes to rest in unchallenged possession of what has been formerly of good service. He knows that change is the law of history, but inertia and threatened loss of some advantages make him shrink. New-age virility revolts, demands a chance to struggle on after the ideal condition.

Man's ideal is in God. Perpetual advance toward that ideal is God's eternal purpose. Gradual approach means progressive change in response to growing knowledge and increasing moral susceptibility. Progress involves giving up, successively, that which, though serviceable in the past, is superseded by something seen to be truer, more helpful in the present. "More light" has everlasting right of way. Progress in science revolutionized the industrial realm. Dollars and cents were at stake, and business men changed their methods. If they also believe that "life is more than meat and body than raiment," they will also change their sociological conceptions. Ethics in business is coming to finer perception, and some old customs must go. Political institutions must breathe in the purer atmosphere. The independent voter is multiplying himself. The flurry of these white ballots betokens a coming storm that will snow under intrenched partisanship and the rule of the bosses.

It is in this world of change, of progress toward the ideal in the mind and purpose of God, that churches are built, schools established, theologies framed, books of interpretation published. Surely these institutions are not in glass receivers, hermetically sealed and kept apart in isolated fixedness. Men are in them, alive, thinking, and crying for the greater light;

conscious of a rich heritage, not only of thought, but of privilege to think.

From the beginning to the very last moment of history, there is no call for any man to be a sounding board or an automaton.

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There is, perhaps, a third term, which stands between "men or institutions." If there is, we are not shut up quite so strictly to a mutually exclusive choice between those two equations even in the supreme crises which call for the decision which Professor Mathews lays in the scale of our judgment. In proclaiming the "kingdom of the Father" Jesus directed those distracted by this very dilemma which is so incisively analyzed in the article to a third choice upon which human loyalty could settle down and be at peace. For that kingdom consists not in individual men, unrelated as monads. Neither are institutions such essentially constituent elements of this "everlasting kingdom" that it could not exist without these changing quantities. But above both individual men and their evolving and disappearing institutions Jesus exalted those divinely constituted and permanent *relationships* of each man to God as Father and to every other man as brother. In prophecy and apostolic practice, as in the words of Jesus, the messianic kingdom consists in the realization of the divine ideals of human relationships which constitutes religion. To Jesus, as to the founders of other faiths, religion is the progressive realization, in experience and in history, of his ideal of the relation which a man should have to God and to his fellow-men. Therefore he laid less emphasis upon passing institutional forms, and supreme insistence upon those essential divine and human relationships which abide the same while seeking more perfect expression in varying institutions.

Now men are plighting more and more faith in these vital relationships Godward and heavenward, while institutions have less and less hold upon them as they cease to be the highest expression of their ideals. The comparative irrelevancy which ecclesiastical institutions now have to the lives of many people by no means indicates an equal lack of conscious relationship between them and God. The loyalty of the present generation to institutional Christianity nowhere nearly measures individual loyalty to the personality and ideals of Jesus. The loosening allegiance to party institutionalism is attended by a more passionate devotion to citizenship at the very centers of political revolt than America has ever seen. The everywhere deepening distrust of the competitive principle as the sole basis of the whole industrial order is offset by a faith in human co-operation that

broadens far beyond any or all mere schemes of economic or utopian institutions.

In the practical expression of these divine-human relationships to be realized in the kingdom of the Father, lies the hope of the race. And by their self-sacrificial loyalty to their highest ideals of them both men and institutions are being judged.

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The principle stated by Professor Mathews, that "the conception of man as an individual is giving way to that of man as a part of a great social unity," expresses, as many think, the most striking and the most significant trend of our time. And it is, in the main, a most beneficent trend. It is widely true that the largest weal of the individual is best furthered by those institutions that promote the richest good of the many. This is emphatically true of the institution, the local church. I wish briefly to apply Professor Mathews' principle to this institution. With all its faults, the church is, today, with the possible exception of the family, the most valuable institution for advancing both individual and social well-being. But what the church deeply needs in order to fulfil its most fruitful mission in this regard is that the individual shall yield to the institution more than is now the case. The emphasis should fall upon the church rather than upon the individual in the church. It is perhaps the central weakness of the church at the present time that it is viewed as a collection of independent individuals, and not as a social organism filled with a corporate life. This is shown by the following familiar facts. It too often happens, especially in the smaller churches, that a single man, exceptionally influential because he has money, or from some other cause, practically rules the church. Whatever he wishes to have done is done. If it is not, a serious division is likely to occur, or at any rate the harmony and efficiency of the church are greatly disturbed. In other churches small cliques of congenial persons stand apart from the other members, and are unwilling to be identified with the church as a unity. In some cases these cliques insist upon it that everything shall go their way. In yet other churches, in which neither of these two conditions precisely exists, there is a strange lack of the fusion of the members into one Christian body. The church as a church is not felt either within or without itself. There is a lack of what may be termed church-consciousness. No church can best nourish the individuals that compose it, or be the social, spiritual force it ought to be in the community

and in the world until every individual in it is a contribution to the effectiveness of the collective body.

Paul had the true conception of the relation of the individual to the church as an institution. "Edify" is his word to express this conception. In one or another of its forms, it occurs about thirty times in his writings. Dean Howson says of Paul's use of the term "edify": "In Paul 'edify' is always a social word, having regard to the mutual improvement of the members of the church, and the growth of the whole body in faith and love." "Seek that ye may abound unto the edifying of the church" (1 Cor. 14:12). He expresses substantially the same truth when he says: "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members of one another" (Rom. 12:3).

Some institutions may need to be checked as institutions. They may be overriding the rights and hindering the welfare of the individual. They may ignore his worth. They may have outlived their usefulness in forwarding human welfare. But it is difficult to see wherein the need of the individual can fail to be best promoted by emphasizing the church as a social whole, as possessed by "the animating spirit of a collective body." Moreover, if the emphasis was transferred from the individual to the church in its corporate life, would not a part, at least, of the fault that is now found with the church by workingmen and socialists be without ground, and the church as an institution become the social force it is divinely fitted and intended to be? The two greatest needs of the church today are that it shall be socialized and spiritualized.

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Professor Mathews' article on "Men or Institutions" is a lucid and discriminating discussion of a subject that is fundamental. There are two or three points which stand out in my own mind with special clearness:

1. The relativity of institutions. It is man and life only that are paramount. It was only one case under a sweeping principle which Jesus indicated when he said: "The sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath." The principle applies to every institution named by Professor Mathews, and to as many others as exist. Church, state, family, property, laws, social customs and conventions, fashions of dress—everything exists for the sake of man, and not the reverse. The bare statement of this principle seems fairly self-evident, yet every fresh advance of man in the interest of more freedom or more opportunity

has commonly been met by a counter-claim for the sacredness of the particular institution whose existence, or whose present form, is imperiled.

2. Another point, implied rather than fully discussed by Professor Mathews, is that of the changing and growing character of human interests themselves. Human rights are not a definitely fixed and measured quantity. They are a dynamic element, growing as man grows and as civilization extends. Therefore an institution which at one time fairly shelters the group of human interests will, at a later time, prove entirely inadequate. Law, custom, and tradition represent the average conception of human rights as they are perceived today. Tomorrow man will require larger institutions, because he will be a larger man. The domain of his perceived interests, rights, and opportunities will have grown with his growth.

3. Professor Mathews rightly calls attention also to the fact that institutions are as inevitable, if not as essential, as man and his interests—that the revolution which destroys all institutions today will build new ones tomorrow. It is the knowledge of this which breeds a wise and genuine conservatism. The thoroughgoing “radical” is likely to be moved by mere hatred for institutions, and consequently leaves humanity in much the condition in which the man was left on the road to Jericho—stripped and beaten and naked. The dead traditionalist, clinging to institutions for their own sake, however much outgrown, is like the priest and Levite passing by on the other side. The genuine conservative, who has some true sense of the value of man and of the institutions which protect and shelter man, is like the good Samaritan who set the wounded man on his own beast and brought him to the inn.

4. It is the chief value of Professor Mathews' paper, therefore, that it points out the eternal significance of Christianity for life—a significance only feebly grasped because we have had a too feeble sense of man as a social being set in an environment which is social, within which all his good must be developed and increased. It is a more vivid sense of what man really is in his nature and relationships which will react on all our conceptions of rights and institutions, and their mutual relation; and this leads steadily to the writer's conclusion that “intelligent apprehension of principles, sagacity in handling situations, deep-seated love are alone adequate to the task—and the greatest of these is love.”

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