

THE NEW MORALITY OF LAMBETH

HAVING learnt by experience how frequently the evil that a man does falls back upon his own head, our wise forefathers gave us the proverb which says that curses always come home to roost. This is brought back to our mind by the significance of the declarations of the recent Lambeth Conference along with the explanations or excuses since offered by the Anglican prelates responsible. It is another case of the proverb. It has taken three hundred years to overthrow the calumnious accusations of the reformers concerning the morality of the ancient monasteries, and it is to Protestant historians like Gairdner that we are indebted for much of the labour involved in the destruction of that false accusation. Does it not seem that the curse has come home to roost when we find the chief authorities of the Anglican body publicly and officially teaching that unnatural vice in sexual relationship is right and good provided that it be done 'in the light of Christian principles'?

We should be tempted to laugh were the blasphemy not so horrible. All who had followed the trimming and compromising of the Anglican leaders were quite prepared to see them bow to expediency in this case also by declaring that birth-prevention was allowable. But it is the hypocrisy of that phrase 'in the light of Christian principles' which sticks in our throat: we were not prepared for that, for we did not think they had fallen so far from Christ. Some of them had already thrown Him over as God; now they try to do that which He said no one could do when He challenged the Jews with: 'Which of you shall convince Me of sin?' If His principles are such as the Anglican prelates understand them, then He is not only not God, but not even a good man. It is long since such an insult was offered to the name of Jesus Christ.

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What will be its effect? Of one thing we may be certain, that having gone so far, they cannot stop. A step downwards in the scale of moral standards is to put one's feet on a slippery incline, to dislodge a stone which begets an avalanche. Experience teaches us that a wrongly gratified appetite ever grows in desire. Their spokesmen, Dean Inge and Bishop Barnes, seem to be marking out the course for them to follow. To us it always seems that the conception of Christianity expounded by these two is precisely that admixture of pagan and Christian teachings which they profess to find in the Catholic Church. Paganism is the religion of materialism mingled with superstition. You would have to look long to find a superstitious reverence equal to that which Dr. Barnes pays to what he calls Science. In a recent address to the University of Birmingham, he told his audience that for the solution of our religious difficulties he was looking 'to our schools and universities, in harmony with all those different Christian communions which are free to embrace new truth.' By this he excludes the Catholic Church, which, moreover, demands to be excluded. There are no new truths; there are new conclusions drawn from old truths, and not all the new conclusions are true. The Lambeth Conference has given us one of these 'new truths,' and has tried to father it on to Jesus Christ. We acknowledge its newness, but deny its truth, for up to the present every official pronouncement of every form of traditional Christianity has condemned as vile all forms of contraception and birth-prevention. No new circumstance in the state of society can change something morally evil into a thing morally good or permissible, for circumstances do not constitute the morality of an action. The Lambeth prelates do not seem to be sufficiently trained in ethics to appreciate this distinction, but we shall have something to say on this point later.

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There has been one effect, however, of the Lambeth Declaration for which we feel positively grateful to their lordships. It has drawn from the chief Catholic authority in England, His Eminence Cardinal Bourne, a statement on the question so precise and definite that it comes like a breath of fresh air after the confused rigmarole of sentiment and false argument contained in the Lambeth pronouncement. Let us repeat it here :

‘ I now reaffirm the teaching of the Catholic Church on this subject, binding on the conscience of every man and every woman. Any direct interference with the natural consequence of the marital relation, namely conception, whether within the married state or outside it, is an unnatural vice, sinning against the nature which the Creator has bestowed on us, and, therefore, grievously displeasing in His sight.’

There you have teaching, definite, dogmatic, authoritative and helpful. Put that alongside the Lambeth Declaration and the two will afford a contrast which scarcely needs comment.

But we may add that it is not only the definite teaching of the Church, that is of Christianity; it is the instinctive teaching of the conscience of every normal man or woman who has not corrupted mind and will by habitual sin in this matter. To the writer it has long seemed that we have heard far too much in this connection of the excuse of sinning in good faith. It must not be forgotten that human nature is essentially good, though corrupted, with instincts which are normally correct and sure guides to morality, and not easily perverted. How many would accept the excuse of a thief that he was ignorant of the existence of the law of private property? Yet that instinct which teaches human beings (and all other animals) the right

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use of all their faculties, especially the sexual faculties, is more deeply rooted in us than the natural reason which, joined to experience, teaches us the necessity of private property for the peaceable conduct of human affairs. And when nature teaches us a thing by instinct, nature protests when we abuse her teaching, protesting especially vigorously at the grave abuse of the faculties with which we are endowed. One form of her protest is the derangement or disease of mind and body which follows the perversion of natural faculties. Another is that reproving inner voice which we call conscience. We are aware, of course, that habitual sin will in the end stifle the voice of conscience; but in most cases a moment's reflection will reawaken it. Most priests will, we think, be able to confirm this truth from their own experience in dealing with souls. Few become so utterly corrupted in mind in consequence of bad will as to be persuaded that evil is good. In view of this it is all the more difficult to find any excuse for the Lambeth prelates who came forward as masters in Israel.

When we turn to the speculative principles on which they try to base their teaching in this declaration, we are bound to confess that their arguments display a confusion of thought which can rarely have been surpassed. Here again another curse seems to have gone home to roost. For many a generation it has been the custom to insult the Church with the accusation of Jesuitry, by which it is meant that, when it suits us, we use the vicious principle that the end justifies the means; in other words, that any means are justifiable to attain our end provided the motive is a good one. By the irony of fate we have lived long enough to find this very principle in so many words on the lips of one of the Lambeth prelates, used to excuse or justify the pronouncement on the lawfulness of contraception. The Bishop of Winchester, speaking at

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the recent Monmouth Church Congress at Newport on the Lambeth Conference, thus laid down the principle :

‘ We believe that in the last resort the moral question (concerning birth-prevention) *arises not so much in the method as in the motive.*’ Of course, the Lambeth declaration comes to the same thing, but it was not so bluntly stated. What his lordship says is that, if your desire to prevent the birth of children arises from a good motive, then you may lawfully use any means to do so, always provided, of course, that you act ‘ in the light of Christian principles.’ We wish his lordship had explained that last phrase.

This, then, is the new morality set forth by guides who reject, or at least seem to be ignorant of, the first principle of natural ethics, the principle on which is based the whole structure of Catholic moral theology or any other system of morality worthy of the name. In the eighteenth question of the *Prima Secundae*, St. Thomas lays down the first norm of morality, which can be expressed thus: *Prima et essentialis bonitas vel malitia actus humani sumitur ab objecto moraliter considerato.* In other words, the first test of the goodness or evil of any human act is taken from that very object which the act of its very nature is intended to accomplish, considered in its relation to right reason, the natural law and the law of God. We have first to settle whether the thing we desire to do is good or evil in itself quite apart from any motive we may have in desiring to do it. The morality of the motive is quite secondary, so that if the thing is bad in itself, no motive, however good, can justify its performance. On his lordship’s wrong principle, murder, adultery and theft would cease to be wrong provided they were committed from a good motive, and, of course, ‘ in the light of Christian principles.’ Hence

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no motive arising from what the Lambeth prelates call a moral obligation can make contraception good or lawful, because the thing is of its very nature wholly bad and immoral, being an abuse and a perversion of the natural faculties and consequently a grave sin in the sight of God.

Finally, it seems a great pity that the Anglican bishops were unable to abstain from poisoning the wells and thus lose their last claim on our respect. We refer to their innuendos about Catholic teaching on this grave subject by which they endeavoured to drag us with them on to the slope of moral decline, thus adding calumny to scandal.

What will be the practical result of this momentous declaration? Very little, we imagine, in the way of direct influence on the lives of those whom the Lambeth prelates claim to lead. As official Anglican teaching it is unimportant and is already past history. The Anglican laity who desired to practise contraception would do so whether the bishops approved or condemned; according to the opinion of a leading Non-conformist divine, their declaration is but a tardy recognition of the obvious, an effort to keep up with the times. We doubt if the bishops flatter themselves that anyone takes notice of their teaching, if teaching it can be called.

But the implications of this declaration are much more tragic for it is the severance of another link which binds official Anglicanism to traditional Christianity. Here again one of their number has put into plain English what is contained in the wordy obscurity of the declaration. In his sermon to the University of Birmingham Dr. Barnes drew this conclusion: 'Inadequate though the standards of thought and conduct of the community are, they are much above the level maintained under the influence of the false asceticism whose supreme domination vanished with the

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Renaissance. We no longer associate sanctity with false ideas of self-sacrifice.'

He and his episcopal brethren have at the Lambeth Conference rejected one of these so-called false ideas of self-sacrifice which have nothing to do with Anglican sanctity: it is the self-sacrifice which in pre-Renaissance times and still in the Catholic Church is called the virtue of marital chastity.

REGINALD GINNS, O.P.

HYMN

THOU in whose hand the shining planets turn
In their great orbits through the void of space,
For nothing less our hungry spirits yearn,
Dread Lord, than Thy embrace.

With naked eyes we cannot front the sun
Lest its fierce beams should blast us into night,
And yet we long to gaze enrapt on One
Unthinkable in light.

Our restless hearts impetuous to Thy calm
Struggle and toss; our intuitions thrust
To Thee, their goal; our fingers to Thy arm
Grope upwards from the dust.

Kindle our spirits at Thy beauty's flame,
And give us wings who to Thy breast would fly—
That we who dare not breathe Thy hidden name
May Abba Father cry.

THEODORE MAYNARD.