

# Mr. Bryan on Individualism Versus Socialism

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Before entering upon a study of the old world and its ways, I accept the invitation of the Century to submit a brief comment upon socialism as compared with individualism. The words individualism and socialism define tendencies rather than concrete systems, for as extreme individualism is not to be found under any form of government, so there is no example of socialism in full operation. All government being more or less socialistic, the contention so far as this subject is concerned is between those who regard individualism as ideal, to be approached as nearly as circumstances will permit and those who regard a socialistic state as ideal, to be established as far and as fast as public opinion will allow.

The individualist believes that competition is not only a helpful but a necessary force in society, to be guarded and protected; the socialist regards competition as a hurtful force, to be entirely exterminated. It is not necessary to consider those who consciously take either side for reasons purely selfish; it is sufficient to know that on both sides there are those who with great earnestness and sincerity present their theories, convinced of their correctness and sure of the necessity for their application to human society.

As socialism is the newer doctrine the socialist is often greeted with epithet and denunciation rather than with argument, but as usual it does not deter him. Martyrdom never kills a cause, as all history political as well as religious demonstrates.

No one can read socialistic literature without recognizing the "moral passion" that pervades it. The Ruskin Club, of Oakland, Cal., quotes with approval an editorial comment which asserts that the socialistic creed inspires a religious zeal and makes its followers enthusiasts in its propagation. It also quotes Prof. Nitto, of the University of Naples, as asserting that "the morality that socialism teaches is by far superior to that of its adversaries," and quotes Thomas Kirkup as declaring, in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, that "the ethics of socialism are identical with those of Christianity."

It will be seen, therefore, that the socialists not only claim superiority in ethics but attempt to appropriate Christ's teachings as a foundation for their creed. As the maintenance of either position would insure them ultimate victory, it is clear that the first battle between the individualist and the socialist must be in the field of ethics. No one who has faith (and who can contend with vigor without such a faith?) in the triumph of the right can doubt that that which is ethically best will finally prevail in every department of human activity.

Assuming that the highest aim of society is the harmonious development of the human race, physically, mentally and morally, the first question to decide is whether individualism or socialism furnishes the best means of securing that harmonious development. For the purpose of this discussion individualism will be defined as the private ownership of the means of production and distribution where competition is possible, leaving to public ownership those means of production and distribution in which competition is practically impossible, and socialism will be defined as the collective ownership, through the state, of all the means of production and distribution.

One advocate of socialism defines it as "common ownership of natural resources and public utilities and the common operation of all industries for the public good." It will be seen that the definitions of socialism commonly in use include some things which can not fairly be described as socialistic, and some of the definitions (like the last one, for instance) beg the question by assuming that the public operation of all industries will necessarily be for the general good. As the socialists agree in hostility to competition as a controlling force, and as individualists agree that competition is necessary for the well being of society, the fairest and most accurate line between the two schools can be drawn at the point where competition begins to be possible, both schools favoring public ownership where competition is impossible, but differing as to the wisdom of public ownership where competition can have free play.

Much of the strength developed by socialism is due to the fact that socialists advocate certain reforms which individualists also advocate. Take, for illustration, the public ownership of water-works. It is safe to say that a large majority of

the people living in cities of any considerable size favor their public ownership. Individualists because it is practically impossible to have more than one water system in a city and socialists on the general ground that the government should own all the means of production and distribution. The sentiment in favor of municipal lighting plants is not yet so strong, and the sentiment in favor of public telephones and public street car lines is still less pronounced, but the same general principles apply to them and individualists, without accepting the creed of socialists, can advocate the extension of municipal ownership to these utilities.

Then, too, some of the strength of socialism is due to its condemnation of abuses which, while existing under individualism, are not at all necessary to individualism—abuses which the individualists are as anxious as the socialists to remedy. It is not only consistent with individualism, but is a necessary implication of it, that the competing parties should be placed upon substantially equal footing, for competition is not worthy of that name if one party is able to arbitrarily fix the terms of the agreement, leaving the other with no choice but to submit to the terms prescribed. Individualists, for instance, can consistently advocate usury laws which fix the rate of interest to be charged, these laws being justified on the ground that the borrower and the lender do not stand upon an equal footing. When the money lender is left free to take advantage of the necessities of the borrower the so called freedom of contract is really freedom to extort. Upon the same ground society can justify legislation against child labor and legislation limiting the hours of adult labor. One can believe in competition and still favor such limitations and restrictions as will make the competition real and effective. To advocate individualism it is no more necessary to excuse the abuses to which competition may lead than it is to defend the burning of a city because fire is essential to human comfort, or to praise a tempest because air is necessary to human life.

In comparing individualism with socialism it is only fair to consider individualism when made as good as human wisdom can make it and then measure it with socialism at its best. It is a common fault of the advocate to present his system, idealized, in contrast with his opponent's system at its worst, and it must be confessed that neither individualist nor socialist has been entirely free from this fault. In dealing with any subject we must consider man as he is, or as he may reasonably be expected to become under the operation of the system proposed, and it is much safer to consider him as he is than to expect a radical change in his nature. Taking man as we find him, he needs, as individualists believe, the spur of competition. Even the socialists admit the advantage of rivalry within certain limits, but they would substitute altruistic for selfish motives. Just here the individualist and the socialist find themselves in antagonism. The former believes that altruism is a spiritual quality which defies governmental definition while the socialist believes that altruism will take the place of selfishness under an enforced collectivism.

Ruskin's statement that "government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life; anarchy and competition eternally and in all things, the laws of death," is often quoted by socialists, but, like generalizations are apt to be, it is more comprehensive than clear. There is a marked distinction between voluntary co-operation, upon terms mutually satisfactory, and compulsory co-operation upon terms agreeable to a majority. Many of the attempts to establish voluntary co-operation have failed because of disagreement as to the distribution of the common property or income, and those which have succeeded best have usually rested upon a religious rather than upon an economic basis.

In any attempt to apply the teachings of Christ to an economic state it must be remembered that His religion begins with a regeneration of the human heart and with an ideal of life which makes service the measure of greatness. Tolstoy, who repudiates socialism as a substantial reform, contends that the bringing of the individual into harmony with God is the all important thing and that this accomplished all injustice will disappear.

It is much easier to conceive of a voluntary association between persons desiring to work together according to the Christian ideal, than to conceive of the successful operation of a system, enforced by law, wherein altruism is the controlling principle. The attempt to unite church and state has never been helpful to either govern-

ment or religion and it is not at all certain that human nature can yet be trusted to use the instrumentalities of government to enforce religious ideas. The persecutions which have made civilization blush have been attempts to compel conformity to religious beliefs sincerely held and zealously promulgated.

The government, whether it leans toward individualism or toward socialism, must be administered by human beings and its administration will reflect the weaknesses and imperfections of those who control it. Bancroft declares that the expression of the universal conscience in history is the nearest approach to the voice of God and he is right in paying this tribute to the wisdom of the masses, and yet we can not overlook the fact that this universal conscience must find governmental expression through frail human beings who yield to the temptation to serve their own interests at the expense of their fellows. Will socialism purge the individual of selfishness or bring a nearer approach to justice?

Justice requires that each individual shall receive from society a reward proportionate to his contribution to society; can the state, acting through officials, make this apportionment better than it can be made by competition? At present, official favors are not distributed strictly according to merit either in republic or in monarchies; is it certain that socialism would ensure a fairer division of rewards? If the government operates all the factories, all the farms and all the stores, there must be superintendents as well as workmen; there must be different kinds of employment, some more pleasant, some less pleasant; is it likely that any set of men can distribute the work or fix the compensation to the satisfaction of all, or even to the satisfaction of a majority of the people? When the government employs comparatively few of the people it must make the terms and conditions inviting enough to draw the persons needed from private employment and if those employed in the public service become dissatisfied they can return to outside occupations; but what will be the result if there is no private employment? What outlet will there be for discontent if the government owns and operates all the means of production and distribution?

Under individualism a man's reward is determined in the open market and where competition is free he can hope to sell his services for what they are worth; will his chance for reward be as good when he must do the work prescribed for him on the terms fixed by those who are in control of the government?

As there is no example of such a socialistic state as is now advocated, all reasoning upon the subject must be confined to the theory, and theory needs to be corrected by experience. As in mathematics no one can calculate the direction of the resultant without a knowledge of all the forces that act upon the moving body, so in estimating the effect of a proposed system one must take into consideration all the influences that operate upon the human mind and heart, and who is wise enough to predict with certainty the result of any system before it has been thoroughly tried? Individualism has been tested by centuries of experience. Under it there have been progress and development. That it has not been free from evil is not a sufficient condemnation. The same rain that furnishes the necessary moisture for the growing crop sometimes floods the land and destroys the harvest; the same sun that coaxes the tiny shoot from mother Earth, sometimes scorches the blade and blasts the maturing stalk. The good things given us by our Heavenly Father often, if not always, have an admixture of evil, to the lessening of which the intelligence of man must be constantly directed. Just now there are signs of an ethical awakening which is likely to result in reforming some of the evils which have sprung from individualism, but which can be corrected without any impairment of the principle.

The individualist, while contending that the largest and broadest development of the individual, and hence of the entire population, is best secured by full and free competition, made fair by law, believes in a spiritual force which acts beyond the sphere of the state. After the government has secured to the individual, through competition, a reward proportionate to his effort, religion admonishes him of his stewardship and of his obligation to use his greater strength, his larger ability, and his richer reward in the spirit of brotherhood. Under individualism we have seen a constant increase in altruism. The fact that the individual can select the objects of his

(Continued on Page 7)