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# Christianizing the Social Order

1912 ♦ excerpts

### What Do We Mean by “Christianizing” the Social Order?

from Ch. 1 of Pt. III:  
“Our Semi-Christian Social Order”

[F]irst we shall have to define what we mean by “christianizing” the social order or any part of it.

. . . To put a stop to child labor in our country would be a more effective way of doing homage to his sovereignty than any business of words and names.

Neither do we want to renew the attempts made in the past by both Catholicism and Protestantism to set up a theocracy ruled by the Church and making Christian belief and worship a compulsory duty of citizenship. . . .

Christianizing the social order means bringing it into harmony with the ethical convictions which we identify with Christ. A fairly definite body of moral convictions has taken shape in modern humanity. They express our collective conscience, our working religion. . . .

We call this “christianizing” the social order because these moral principles find their highest expression in the teachings, the life, and the spirit of Jesus Christ. Their present power in Western civilization is in large part directly traceable to his influence over its history. To the

great majority of our nation, both inside and outside of the churches, he has become the incarnate moral law and his name is synonymous with the ideal of human goodness. To us who regard him as the unique revelation of God, the unfolding of the divine life under human forms, he is the ultimate standard of moral and spiritual life, the perfect expression of the will of God for humanity, the categorical imperative with a human heart. But very many who do not hold this belief in a formulated way or who feel compelled to deny it, including an increasing portion of our Jewish fellow-citizens, will still consent that in Jesus our race has reached one of its highest points, if not its crowning summit thus far, so that Jesus Christ is a prophecy of the future glory of humanity, the type of Man as he is to be. Christianizing means humanizing in the highest sense. . . .



### The Christianized Sections of Our Social Order

from Ch. 2 of Pt. III:  
“Our Semi-Christian Social Order”

A fourth great section of our social order which has been christianized is the political life. To Americans this may seem a staggering assertion, for of all corrupt things surely our politics is the corruptest. I confess to some

misgivings in moving that this brother be received among the regenerate, but I plead on his behalf that he is a newly saved sinner. Politics has been on the thorny path of sanctification only about a century and a half, and the tattered clothes and questionable smells of the far country still cling to the prodigal.

The fundamental redemption of the State took place when special privilege was thrust out of the constitution and theory of our government and it was based on the principle of personal liberty and equal rights.

When the rich and the poor have justice meted to them in our courts with an uneven hand, and the fact is made plain and comprehensible, it is felt to be an outrage and a betrayal of the spirit of our institutions. When powerful interests receive special consideration and benefits from Congress or the State legislatures, all concerned are careful to mask the fact and disguise the action as if it were done for the public interest. When the property of the rich is partly exempted from taxation by unequal methods of assessment, and the burden of public expenditure is thrown on the poorer classes, we feel free to protest against it as a departure from the clear intent of our fundamental laws. In short, inequality and oppression, the denial of equal rights and of the equal humanity of all is felt to be a backsliding and disgrace. . . .

Only by comparison with the past do we realize that our political system has really entered on a decisive moral change. The foundations of our commonwealth were fortunately laid when the democratic idealism of the eighteenth century was gathering strength. Soon afterward it got its tremendous utterance in the French Revolution. In every revolutionary movement the highest political and social conceptions of that age are seized by the revolutionary party, and put forward in order to enlist moral support and enthusiasm. When the plowshare tears open the soil, new seeds can gain lodgment. The American Revolution, like the French, was essentially a movement of the

capitalist class and was impelled by their economic interests, but as long as the struggle lasted the leaders were inspired by higher enthusiasms, and the necessity of rallying all available spiritual forces gave the convinced radicals and idealists a comparatively free hand for the moment. Between 1776 and 1786 the ardent sentiments of the Declaration of Independence had cooled down into very calculating class interest, and the fundamental law of our country was by no means framed to promote and extend democracy in coming days. But at least we had no king, and no landed and hereditary nobility. The young capitalist class still had its milk teeth. So by the favor of Providence and by our political and economic babyhood the principles of liberty and equality got a solid footing in our traditions. Some of the inherited immoralities, such as the restrictions of the suffrage under which the Constitution was adopted,<sup>1</sup> were overcome, and even when immense inequalities of possession grew up, appeal still lay to the primitive decalogue of our liberties.

In practice we are a nation of backsliders. The whisper of awe and surprise that runs through the country when a powerful malefactor is actually brought to justice is proof that the rich and the poor are not equal before our courts. The real decisions in politics are made by small cliques, and except in seasons of popular revolt the votes of great numbers of citizens count for almost nothing. In actual practice the administration of public affairs is full of favoritism to the powerful, and even more full of damnable neglect for those things which are really vital to the common people.

Yet all these things are in the nature of a derailment of justice; the roadbed and the trackage are still there, even when the train is ditched. These apostasies from the American standards of right have to cloak their real nature

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<sup>1</sup> Of 3,000,000 inhabitants about 120,000 had the suffrage. [Footnote, as numbered, in original]

in order to exist at all. The means of dethroning the usurpers of public power are always within reach. Graft is at least not embodied in the Constitution, nor declared to be the hallowed foundation of the commonwealth. When some of our States concluded to curb the extralegal power of the bosses by direct primaries, uniform accounting, direct legislation, and the recall, these enormous changes were secured by only a few years of moderately vigorous agitation. . . . Slavery was the one great social institution contradicting the democratic principle which was able to secure recognition and protection in the federal Constitution. It long jutted into our American life as a disturbing remnant from an earlier and evil age. From the terrible sacrifice which it cost our nation to get rid of it we can learn the difference between a suppression of human rights that is supported by the fundamental law, and a frustration of human rights that circumvents the law.

The backslidings of our politics are partly due to the youth of democracy. It is still in its adolescence. For ages government was managed for the people by a select group and all the expedients and theories of government were evolved to suit that condition. The people have to learn how to do it. The running of coöperative stores and factories is a new art which has to be learned with losses and suffering, whereas management by corporations is well understood and effective. Democracy stands for the coöperative idea applied to politics; monarchy and aristocracy represent in statecraft the same ideals and methods which corporations represent in business.

Another cause for the frequent breakdown of popular government is the fact that the State very directly affects the property interests of the country. But these interests do not in the least acknowledge the principle of equal human rights, and balk at every attempt to conform them to that doctrine. Consequently politics is the battleground of two opposing forces of the Christian principle of liberty and equality lodged

in our democracy, and of the mammonistic principle lodged in our business life. The family, the Church, and the school are only indirectly affected by this struggle; politics is involved directly. The State is like a breakwater, pounded by hungry seas. As long as it holds, let us thank God and not wonder if it is wet and slippery with ooze. When our business life is christianized, the fundamental Christianity of our political structure will become clearer and more effective.

In spite of all failures we can assert that our political communities are constitutionally on a Christian footing. Instead of legalizing class inequality, they at least try to be an organized expression of the equal rights of all. Instead of being a firmly wrought system for holding down the weak and depriving them of the natural means of self-help and even of a voice to utter their wrongs, our government tries to be a guarantee of freedom and a protection to the helpless. Instead of being constitutionally an organization of a clique for their private advantage, it is planned as an organization of all for the common good, and only falls into the hands of marauding interests through the ignorance and laziness of the citizens. Democracy is not equivalent to Christianity, but in politics democracy is the expression and method of the Christian spirit. . . .

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### **The Law of Tooth and Nail**

from Ch. 4 of Pt. III:  
"Our Semi-Christian Social Order"

The moral instinct of men has always condemned competitive selfishness, just as it has always admired the moral beauty of teamwork. Our hearts thrill when we see any one throwing himself heart and soul into a common task and risking his own safety to insure the common success. By the same token we fail to thrill when any one haggles for himself and seeks to get the better of his fellows. The child that "won't play,"

the soldier that deserts in time of danger, the workman that helps to break a strike, the boy that “snitches” on his pals, are not objects of admiration to their mates, nor to wise outsiders. The trader has always been the outstanding case of the man who plays his own hand and sacrifices social solidarity for private gain. Consequently the trading class has never ranked high among the social classes in older civilizations, like that of Japan. He was not expected to limit himself by the law of honor, but neither did he receive honor. On the other hand, in our modern era the trading class has become the ruling class, and consequently the selfishness of trade has been exalted to the dignity of an ethical principle. Every man is taught to seek his own advantage, and then we wonder that there is so little public spirit. We have allowed workmates to be pitted against each other in the competitive struggle and then are astonished that Christianity has a hard time of it.

The reign of competition is a reign of fear. The rate of mortality for small business concerns is higher than infant mortality. If all the leaden weight of fear of all business men who watch a vanishing margin of profit through the year could be gathered up and set before us in some dramatic form, it would palsy our joy in life. Business panics merely render this chronic condition acute and make men high up who have been secure in prosperity feel the same sufferings which others have felt who went down before them. A reign of fear is never a reign of God. Fear makes children lie and business men cheat. In competition the worst man sets the pace, and good men follow because they are afraid. . . .

## **Private Interests Against the Common Good**

from Ch. 5 of Pt. IV: “The Invasion of God’s Country”

. . . The inflow of immigrants from the south and east of Europe was first set going by corporations that needed cheap and docile labor to keep down the wages and the spirit of the native American workingmen. Their coming has since been stimulated systematically by the great transportation interests that make their heaviest profits from the steerage passengers. These private interests have worked against the common good. They have burdened our cities with an undigested mass of alien people; they have lowered the standard of living for millions of native Americans; they have checked the propagation of the Teutonic stock; they have radically altered the racial future of our nation; and they have set a new destiny for our national religion. If in the next thirty years the Catholic population outnumbers the Protestant, and if the Church then applies Roman theories about Church and State to American life in politics, we shall owe that serious situation in part to the capitalistic interests that overcame the poverty and conservatism of the European peasantry and set this mass immigration moving. . . .

Great numbers of capitalists laid the foundation for their fortunes in our Civil War. Army supplies opened up a tremendous market for uniforms and blankets, arms and ammunitions, and the unchanging character of these masses of goods gave the widest scope to the wholesale methods of capitalism. But Capital was not satisfied with legitimate profits. “So tremendous was the graft in connection with contracts for military supplies that most historians draw back in horror when they have lifted but a corner of the thick blanket of concealment that those who profited by the plunder have drawn over the mess. One Congressional committee, headed by Robert Dale Owen, son of Robert Owen, the Utopian Socialist, uncovered frauds of \$17,000,000 in

\$50,000,000 worth of contracts.”<sup>1</sup> One of the main objects of the Federal campaign was to prevent the exportation of cotton from the South in order to cripple Southern finances. From the point of view of the North, to assist in marketing cotton gave aid and comfort to the enemy and was treasonable. But when cotton was ten cents a pound in the South and fifty cents in the North, the profit was too great for patriotism. Northern merchants, in collusion with federal army officers, passed contraband cotton over the line, thereby prolonged the war, the outcome of which was inevitable, sacrificed the lives of additional men on both sides, and increased the debt resulting from the war. Private interest was against the common good.

The distorting influence exerted by private financial interests on American political life is so familiar that it scarcely needs discussion. It is fair to say that back of every chronic corruption has been some private interest that needed silence or favors. “As the smoke lifts we can mark just who are resisting law and corrupting government. In the cities the fight is chiefly with the vice caterers and the public-service corporations. The former want a ‘wide-open’ town. The latter want unhampered enjoyment of their monopoly power. Battling along with these big interests are bankers scheming for deposits of city funds, rookery landlords in terror of the health-officer, business men intent on grabbing an alley or a water-front, and contractors eager to ‘job’ public works.”<sup>1</sup> When private interests want something that is against public interest, they are willing to pay for the favor. After a time those in control get the appetite, and levy blackmail even on undertakings that serve the public in legitimate ways. Corruption in politics is simply the application of commercial methods and principles to the administration of government. In business the middleman charges

a commission when he puts through a deal between two parties. Why should he not do so in politics? In business a man who controls a commodity will charge a monopoly price and would be considered a fool if he did not. A set of men controlling a legislature or a city administration have monopoly control of the machinery that turns out franchises or contracts. Why should they not charge a price to those who want the goods? . . .

The most influential and permanent legislative body in the nation, the United States Senate, was notoriously under the control of the great Interests for years, and in many respects they turned a body that is to serve the common good into a force that betrayed it. This is the essence of treason. The Senators were appointed by the railroads and express companies, and they in turn nominated the federal judges and fixed in the courts, which are now the most influential organization of government, a number of men who are constitutionally predisposed to side with the private interests against the common good. The tenure of the judges is such that only the slow action of death or a revolution can change the bias thus set up for years to come. Even five years ago there was still general confidence that the courts had remained untouched by commercialism and faithful to the common good. That conviction is now slowly disintegrating as our political education is going on. The entire upheaval in the political alignment of 1912, the demand for direct primaries, for direct legislation, for the recall of judges, for the popular election of senators, are an expression of the profound and durable conviction of the nation, drawn from a fearfully costly process of education, that our whole political organization, as it stood ten years ago, had been turned into an instrument to victimize the people on behalf of private interests. Really, nothing more damning can be said than this tremendous verdict of a whole nation.

As business outgrows the automatic checks of competition the need for government

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<sup>1</sup> Simons, “Social Forces in American History,” p. 280.

[Footnote, as numbered, in original]

<sup>1</sup> Professor E. A. Ross, “Sin and Society,” p. 165.

[Footnote, as numbered, in original]

inspection, investigation, interference, and control becomes constantly greater if the common good is not to be surrendered helplessly to monopoly extortion. Publicity and a clear recognition of the facts have become as essential to the body politic in its complex modern life as free and unobstructed action of the brain is to the physical body. But that is what the great private interests do not want. They invariably resist investigation and seek to paralyze all private and public agencies of scrutiny and publicity. "They are able to gag critics, hobble investigators, hood the press, and muzzle the law. Drunk with power, in office and club, in church and school, in legislature and court, they boldly make their stand, ruining the innocent, shredding the reputations of the righteous, destroying the careers and opportunities of their assailants, dragging down pastor and scholar, publicist and business man, from livelihood and influence, unhorsing alike faithful public servant, civic champion, and knight-errant of conscience, and all the while gathering into loathsome captivity the souls of multitudes of young men."<sup>1</sup>



### **Community Life and Public Spirit**

from Ch. 4 of Pt. VI: "The Methods of Advance"

The problem of creating a body of willing and hard-working employees for an expanding network of community service is a real problem, but a splendid and hopeful one. Our civil service was poor in the past because it was outside of the spirit of democracy. The spoils system which controlled it was essentially a recrudescence of feudal despotism. Your party boss was a miniature imitation of a feudal king, distributing office and largess to his courtiers, demanding the same unthinking loyalty, and viewing the public

as an unusually large oyster. These kinglets are to-day fighting the invasion of the new democratic measures with the same moral indignation and immoral craft with which the European dynasties fought the inroads of democracy when it first began, and for the same reason. If direct nominations, home rule for cities, uniform accounting, commission government, direct legislation, and the recall succeed in really democratizing our political business, we shall soon see the rise of a new type of public officers who will be leaders of the coming social order. There are plenty of forerunners of that type now at work. These men will then have to put their own spirit into their subordinates and that requires high talents for education and organization. Indeed, the efficient management of the public service will call out human qualities of a higher order than capitalistic business. They will find themselves compelled to summon the public spirit to their aid at every turn, and to intensify and educate it, while the managers of corporations are quite willing to let the public spirit drowse on with the sleeping dogs whom none cares to stir.



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<sup>1</sup> Professor E. A. Ross, "Sin and Society," p. 99. [Footnote as numbered in original]