

RELIGION AND SOCIAL SERVICE



MAN'S MORAL PROGRESS DENIED

LESS THAN a year ago Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, talking to a group of journalists on his ninetieth birthday, uttered a sentence which, caught up by the press of the world, startled and shocked an age accustomed to regard itself as the onward-pressing vanguard of progress and reform. "I have come to the general conclusion," said this last of the Victorian giants, who shared with Darwin the discovery of the epoch-making theory of natural selection, "that there has been no advance either in intellect or morals from the days of the earliest Egyptians to the keel-laying of the latest dreadnought." In his last book, "Social Environment and Moral Progress," published only a few months before his death, this thesis is maintained and elaborated through nearly a score of chapters, and the present system of society is denounced as "rotten from top to bottom." "It is not too much to say," he asserts, "that the social environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that our world has ever seen." In support of this judgment he cites the condition of the slums in great cities, the struggle of millions for the bare necessities of life, the extortions of middlemen, the remorseless greed of capital, and the maladministration of justice.

By morality Dr. Wallace does not mean conduct, which is directly influenced by environment, but those inherent qualities which constitute character, and which he believes have remained unchanged in the human race since the dawn of history. He says:

"All the evidence we possess tends to show that altho the actions of most individuals are to a considerable extent determined by their social environment, that does not imply any alteration in their character. Every one's experience of life, and especially the example of his friends and associates, leads him to repress his passions, regulate his emotions, and in general to use his judgment before acting, so as to secure the esteem of his fellows and greater happiness for himself; and these restraints, becoming habitual, may often give the appearance of an actual change of character till some great temptation or violent passion overcomes the usual restraint and exhibits the real nature, which is usually dormant.

"Now, it is this inherent and unchangeable character itself that tends to be transmitted to offspring, and this being the case, there can be no progressive improvement in character without some selective agency tending to such improvement."

Glancing over the list of great moral teachers in very early times, Dr. Wallace reminds us that the race produced Socrates and Plato about 400 B.C., Confucius and Buddha, one or two centuries earlier; Homer earlier still; and the author of the great India epic, the Mahabharata, about 1500 B.C. "All these," he says, "afford indications of intellectual and moral character quite equal to our own; while their lower manifestations, as shown by their wars and love of gambling, were no worse than corresponding immoralities to-day." He explains this by the theory—rejected by Darwin—that when man, as a mere animal, had reached the required degree of perfection, he received

"within a strictly limited period, perhaps of a very few generations, or even one generation," the spiritual influx which started him on his course of purely human development. While standards of conduct have changed with changing conditions and needs, Dr. Wallace believes that, at least within the period of history, men have always manifested about the same varying degrees of devotion to whatever were the accepted standards and ideals of the time and place as they do to-day. And by this test he finds the savage races of to-day "not morally inferior to civilized races." Returning to his indictment of the social and industrial environment which has developed since the beginning of the nineteenth century, he says:

"We see a continuous advance of man's power to utilize the forces of nature to an extent which surpasses everything he had been able to do during all the preceding centuries of his recorded history.

"We see also that the result of this vast economic revolution has been almost wholly evil.

"We see that this hundredfold increase of wealth, amply sufficient to provide necessities, comforts, and all beneficial refinement and luxuries for our whole population has been distributed with such gross injustice that the actual condition of those who produce all this wealth has become worse and worse, no efficient arrangements having been made that from the overflowing abundance produced all should receive the mere essentials of a healthy and happy existence.

"We have seen huge cities grow up, every one of them with their overcrowded, insanitary slums, where men, women, and children die prematurely as surely as tho a body of secret poisoners were constantly at work to destroy them.

"We see thousands of girls compelled by starvation to work in such an poisoned environment as to produce horribly painful and disfiguring disease, which is often fatal in early youth, or in what ought to have

been, and what might have been, the period of maximum enjoyment of their womanhood. And to this very day no efficient steps have been taken to abolish these conditions.

"We see millions still struggling in vain for a sufficiency of the bare necessities of life (which in their misery is all they ask), often culminating in actual starvation, or in suicide, to which they are driven by the dread of starvation. Yet our Governments, selected from among the most educated, the most talented, the wealthiest of the country, with absolute power to make what laws and regulations they please, and an overflowing fund of accumulated wealth to draw upon, do nothing, altho more people die annually of want than are killed in a great war, and more children than could be slaughtered by many Herods.

"And while all this goes on in the depths . . . a little higher up, among the middlemen distributors of the necessities and luxuries of life, bribery, adulteration, and various forms of petty dishonesty are rampant.

"And higher yet, among the great capitalists, the merchant princes, the captains of industry, we find hard taskmasters who drive down wages below the level of bare subsistence, and who support a more gigantic and wide-spread system of gambling than the world has ever seen.

"And, finally, our administration of what we call 'Justice' (and of which we are so proud because our judges can not be



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ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE.

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bribed) is utterly *unjust*, because it is based on a system of money fees at every step; because it is so cumbrous and full of technicalities as to need the employment of attorneys and counsel at great cost, and because all petty offenses are punishable by fine or imprisonment, which makes poverty itself a crime while it allows those with money to go practically free.

"Taking account of these various groups of undoubted facts, many of which are so gross, so terrible, that they can not be overstated, it is not too much to say that our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom, and the social environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen."

But while Dr. Wallace holds to his startling opinion that "there has been no definite advance of morality from age to age, and that even the lowest races, at each period, possess the same intellectual and moral nature as the higher," he does not say that no moral progress is possible in the future. The laws of natural selection that govern purely physical evolution do not operate here, it is true, because "the higher intellectual or moral powers are so rarely of life-preserving value, and are not infrequently the reverse, that they are not *cumulative*, tho they are *hereditary*." For the evolution of man's moral and intellectual nature, then, we must look to some other selective agency. Such an agency will become operative, declares Dr. Wallace, when women achieve real freedom of choice in marriage. "Then we shall find that a system of *truly natural* selection will come spontaneously into action which will steadily tend to eliminate the lower, the less developed, or in any way defective types of men, and will thus continuously raise the physical, moral, and intellectual standard of the race."
