

PROHIBITION VERSUS CHRISTIANITY

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Few persons will, I think, deny that the principal strength of the agitation in favor of prohibition lies in a sort of religious fervor based upon the belief that the use of beverages containing alcohol in any quantity whatever is in itself a wrong. Thus Congressman Keating, replying to the statement that prohibition fails to prohibit, is reported as saying that one might as well urge the repeal of the laws against stealing and murder because these laws do not absolutely prevent the crimes they prohibit. The analogy breaks down on more than one point, but this classification of drinking as crime is characteristic.

The position is common to Prohibitionists as a whole. One religious journal which I often see has an editorial writer who straddles the fence by asserting that while the use of such beverages is a "natural right," the dealers are so completely in league with the vicious elements of society that prohibition is the only resort. Apart from the ethical weakness of this position, apart from the statement about dealers which, made in this sweeping way, is a slander, it is enough to note that this is so far from being the common position of prohibitionists, that the writer's own editorial colleagues do not appear to endorse it. If the people now on the dry side were all convinced that to drink is a "natural right," prohibition would be dealt a shrewder blow than it has ever yet received.

This feeling which, fifty or sixty years ago, was founded on the conviction that what is abused by some should be forbidden to all—a position which, thus crudely stated, was rejected by nearly all Christian moralists and by most secular ethicists—has, of late years, gained much strength from certain so-called "scientific" arguments. These arguments, which consist to a very great extent in the dressing up of

erroneous premises so as to make them suggest conclusions which need not follow from them, form in themselves a very curious subject of study. The present writer is concerned with them only in so far as they are employed to bolster up the religious or semi-religious presentation of the prohibitionist cause.

The prohibitionist often claims that it is now clear, as the result of scientific investigation, that alcohol, in any quantity whatever, is injurious to human beings, if taken internally, and that this injury is mental and moral as well as physical. Hence it is sinful to use these beverages, not on the old ground that they are abused by some, but for the new and (if true) entirely valid reason that they are injurious to all. This prohibitionist statement of course ignores a vast body of scientific and medical opinion which rejects it. It also ignores, what is still more important, the experience and belief of human beings throughout almost the whole of history.

So cleverly have these statements been published and exploited, so loudly have the conclusions which they seem to involve been dinned in our ears, that the prohibitionist confidently expects us to *impose his tenets upon posterity*¹ by the passing of a Constitutional amendment.

Consistently with this position, and with this position only,—that the drinking of these beverages is in itself sinful,—the prohibitionist has striven both consciously and unconsciously to banish the practice from otherwise respectable surroundings, and to force it into an association with other vices. In these efforts he has attained a measurable degree of success, and this, in turn, has lent a new wing to his army. For now, even if one differ with him to the extent of protesting, however feebly, that drinking is a “natural right,” one can still endorse his propaganda and avoid his often unpleasant censures, by pointing to this association of “natural right” with recognized wrong, and making it one’s “reason” for upholding prohibition. One can do this if one is willing to be a moral milksop. But to vote that what one regards as a natural right shall be declared forever illegal, is cowardly, un-American, and un-Christian. In this connection it is peculiarly un-Christian. That is what this paper is written to point out.

¹ For some justification of the use of this phrase see a very able article in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW of February, 1918, by Fabian Franklin.

The prohibitionist has not been so cordially received in those Christian bodies which are known as distinctively traditional in their teaching as in those that are less so. Practically every Protestant body in the United States has introduced the ceremonial use of some non-alcoholic beverage where, formerly, wine was employed. But nowhere in the world has this been true of the Anglican Communion, the Roman Catholic Church, or of the Oriental "Orthodox" churches. These all retain the use of true wine in the sacrament of the altar. A certain small amount of prohibitionist agitation within the Episcopal Church—due in part, perhaps, to the number of unassimilated converts which it contains—has not in the least affected the rubrics governing this practice. So strong, indeed, is the feeling with which Anglicans regard the prohibitionist propaganda, that prohibition, even as a war measure, has been opposed by some of them.²

This sharp differentiation relates not only to religious rites. Most of us remember the late Bishop Potter's "subway saloon," which was denounced by prohibitionists, whose faith in the ability of drink to degrade weakens so far as to make them desire that every other possible influence shall be brought to bear in order to debase the drinker.

The "abolition of the army canteen" was due to a prohibitionist agitation which, so far from treating the drinking of beer as a "natural right," insisted upon carrying the day in a manner calculated to expose our soldiers to dangers from which the canteen was some sort of protection.

I believe it to be altogether better that the Government itself should furnish the men with honest drink in decent surroundings, than that they should be allowed to walk five miles in search of "rotgut" and disease. If the men are to be compelled to accept in practice the prohibitionist religion, they ought not to be given any leave of absence, for they will probably find the worst possible drink in the most vicious surroundings at the nearest point which the vendors can reach.

If the men want beer, let them have good beer. Prohibition has not raised the fighting value of the Russians, nor does beer appear to have been abolished by our more active

¹ Russian, Greek, Serbian, etc.

² More especially in England. Were it not associated in their minds with a cultus which arouses their instinctive suspicions, Prohibition during the war might have received their support.

Allies and our highly efficient enemy. The only consistent objection can come from those who believe that beer is, in itself, a wrong. It is, of course, ludicrous to say that to drink beer is a "natural right" but that it is wrong to exercise this right in any conceivable circumstances.

It is not, then, simply that Catholics fear an attack upon their religious practices, although the religious animus of the typical prohibitionist, as well as actual legislation in some States, more than justifies their uneasiness on this ground. Nor is it only on broadly ethical grounds that they base their opposition, though here also their case seems, to the present writer, invulnerable. Beyond all this there seems to be an almost instinctive antagonism as between prohibition on the one hand and traditional Christianity on the other. The latter has sensed a thrust at its very heart. It is not this, that, or the other thing that is jeopardized. It is an essential truth of religion.

Briefly stated, the Christological objection to prohibitionism is, of course, something like this: Christ, being divine and consequently infallible, could not have erred. Since it is well known that Christ used wine Himself and gave it to others, and since this use of wine by both Christ and by His earliest disciples¹ was social as well as sacramental, prohibitionism involves an attack upon a teaching regarded as fundamental by the followers of traditional Christianity. Prohibitionism is not inconsistent with Mohammedanism. Mr. Chesterton in his brilliant *The Flying Inn* has noticed this affinity as between Mohammedanism and Prohibition. More recently His Eminence Cardinal Gibbons has been quoted in a similar sense. Nor is the connection a forced one. A purely negative asceticism is characteristic of the Oriental cults (which accounts, by the way, for the immense popularity of Schopenhauer in some Asiatic countries). It is quite foreign to the spirit of Christianity. Mohammedanism speaks of Christ as a mere prophet, and attempts (with the indifferent success which so often attends prohibitionist efforts) to enforce total

¹This fact shows the inapplicability of two texts often quoted by prohibitionists, I. Cor. VIII, 8, "If meat maketh my brother to stumble I will eat no meat while the world standeth—," and I Thes. V, 22, "Abstain from every appearance (or form) of evil." Context shows that the danger apprehended from the use of meat consecrated to idols is not gluttony but idolatry. To make the second text apply to moderate drinking, the prohibitionist must (a) read his conclusion into his premise and (b) make St. Paul's own practice and his deliberate advice to a younger clergyman (cf. I Tim. V, 28) inconsistent with his avowed principles.

add prohibitionism to its religious tenets, or to incorporate total abstinence in its discipline, would imply that the sect concerned had made the acceptance of some Kenotic theory a condition of Church membership. Not only would this involve an interference with true Christian liberty, but the position assumed would be philosophically untenable,

(c) That important individual, described by many who profess solicitude for his welfare as "the man in the street," is usually and quite properly uninterested in the details of theological controversy. His business may be "labor" or law or medicine or commerce, but theology it certainly is not. He needs *religion*. He is the better for worshipping God; for pleading the atoning sacrifice of Christ. What little theological knowledge he needs in order to fulfill these duties had best be given him in his boyhood and youth. There is, of course, such a thing as the theological mind, but the average layman does not have it, and while he can, and frequently does, believe in a few helpful truths, simply and clearly stated, he is likely to be repelled if he be compelled to listen to the minutiae of theology and to modifying theories for the consideration of which his secular work (the due performance of which is a Christian duty) leaves him no time.

We shall not, if we are wise, bother him with the Kenotic Theory. And if he does not know the Kenotic Theory (the chances are that he has never heard of it), his ideas (when he comes to form them) as to whether or not prohibitionism is consistent with Christian belief, are likely to form themselves on the lines of the "crude" statement which I have already outlined.

Of course, men have often, for a time, held mutually inconsistent beliefs without thinking very hard about them. But logic gets its way in the long run.

But the whole notion that any form or modification of the Kenotic Theory can possibly reconcile the prohibitionist tenets to traditional Christianity is inherently absurd. For it involves the proposition that, although Christ was so far subject to human limitations that He was unaware of the (alleged) harmfulness of all alcoholic beverages to the physical, mental, and moral nature of man, He was, at the same time, so far free from these limitations that He was, Himself, immune to these effects!

It thus becomes necessary for the Kenotic prohibitionist to claim for Him a freedom from human limitations which

must unite Catholic to Modernist in emphatic denial, and which vitiates the whole teaching of the Incarnation because it implies (what traditional Christianity denies) an intervention of supernatural power to save the human nature of Christ from an injury to which, in the ordinary course of nature, it would be liable (and which, owing to a suspension of that power, He could not possibly foresee). I pass over the frequently seen but unsupported assertion that the "wine" of the Last Supper was not true wine but unfermented grape-juice. The Last Supper took place in Spring, and it belongs to the "limitations" of that period that unfermented grape-juice could not be kept until Spring. Even were this not the case, the Greek word employed is one which is always used to describe true wine.

Furthermore, unless there has been a similar unheard-of intervention in their behalf, these alleged deplorable effects have been operative for nineteen centuries upon a vast number of Christians, including all Catholic priests and, until quite recently, most Protestant ministers who have used wine in sacramental or memorial rites. If the universal harmfulness of wine were really a "scientific fact," it is a wonder that the prohibitionist Moslems did not overrun Christian Europe centuries ago.

Of course it is not a scientific fact. It is a superstitious belief. But it forms the only philosophical basis upon which a conscientious man can vote for the proposed Constitutional amendment. For unless one is convinced that any use of beverages containing alcohol is always and everywhere wrong, it is cowardly and un-Christian to vote that it shall be always and everywhere illegal.

It is cowardly. For it is the counsel of despair to act upon the assumption that there will always exist conditions such as would forbid all exercise of what one believes to be a natural right.

And it is un-Christian to join hands with those who are doing their very best, on the basis of anti-Christian assumptions, to make it forever impossible for American men to do what is, on Christian hypotheses, entirely permissible.

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