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The attitude of Judaism towards Private Property and towards Communism

Sunday, April 24, 1949

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The great issues of our day, dear friends, revolve around these questions. To what extent, if at all, is private property or private capital desirable or socially justified? Are the interests of society best served through private or collective control of the means of production? And as a corallary to these questions and issues, there are others. Can a collectivist control of the economic life of a people tolerate a democratic control of its political life? Then there is the moral issue whether the accumulation of wealth in the hands of an individual is to the spiritual advantage or to the spiritual detriment of that individual; whether, on the other hand, poverty is not a more salutary discipline for men.

Now, many and conflicting answers have been given, are being given to these questions, and these answers are being given not only in books through the written word or through the spoken word, but also as bayonets and bullets through war and revolution all over the world to this very day. And the final definitive answers are still a long way off. And I believe that it is helpful, therefore, though not at all conclusive, to consult the past experiences and the accumulated wisdom of an old ethical religion like ours and its code to find out what it has to say about some of these problems. Surely these problems did not originate in our day and are not peculiar to our times. The men of long ago were not quite as immature as we sometimes assume them to be. They faced the facts of the economic life of their time quite realistically and they arrived at certain conclucions which could be helpful for us to consider; in fact, when you study the code of Judaism, you find that a very considerable part of it is devoted to the problem of economic justice and to all those issues which derive from the possession or the non-possession of property, and all the questions about proper use of property and the relationship between employer and employee, and the rights of labor, the privileges and responsibilities of wealth and ownership, and what is involved in the social inequalities between rich and poor.

Judaism is a prophetic religion - a religion concerned with the establishment of a just society here on earth. It is not primarily concerned with the hereafter.

"The Heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave to the children of men." And therefore, Judaism has much to say about these problems. The God of Judaism is worshipped by helping to build this just society, not by speculations, however fervent, concerning the hereafter or by seeking to escape the day-to-day tasks involved in the progress of society, by seeking to escape into some hermitage or some ivory tower. The worship of God is true moral action, and through the moral perfection of one's own life. "The Lord of hosts is exalted through justice, and the Holy God is sacrificed through righteousness."

What has Judaism to say on the subject of private ownership? Nowhere in the Bible do you find any condemnation of private ownership as such. Ownership is intrinsically neither wrong nor evil - not even great ownership, not even great wealth. Among the things which the famous Rabbi Rab prayed for was for a life of wealth and of honor. Concerning the happiness of the man who reveres the Lord, the Psalmist says: "Prosperity and riches will be in his house." Ecclisiastes, who has such profound thoughts on life generally, in his great book nevertheless says, "Every man to whom God gives riches and wealth and has enabled him to eat of it - this is the gift of God."

Wealth and possession are in themselves not evil, nor is poverty in itself a virtue. There is no cult of poverty in Judaism as there was among some of the people of antiquity. Judaism believed that poverty can be a spiritual liability as well as a physical distress. If there is no food, there is no Torah, say the Rabbis. Poverty frequently makes men dead to great ideals - not always, but frequently. When the great Moses came to the slaves with a vision of freedom, the Bible says that they could not listen because of their hard labor. Poverty in the house of a man is worse than 50 plagues and it is equal to all the maledictions which you find in Deuteronomy. It is how wealth is used that determines whether it is a blessing or a curse.

When Solomon dedicated the Temple, he prayed unto the Lord: "God, give to each man according to his ways as You know his heart." And the Rabbis said, "When a man prays for wealth and Thou knowest his worth, grant his prayer."

Now, there were religions which extolled poverty, especially those who felt that this especial order of the world was about to terminate quickly. When a man came to the founder of Christianity and asked his master what must he do to make sure of eternal life, Jesus replied, "You know all the commandments." The man replied, "I have obeyed all these commandments ever since I was a child." Jesus answered, "There is but one thing that you lack. Go, sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and come and be a follower of mine." That is exalted teaching, but it is not the teaching of Judaism. One need not make himself poor in order to serve God or his fellowmen. Even in giving to the poor, Judaism, which was the first to make charity mandatory - to establish poor laws, even in the giving of charity, Judaism declared that a fair measure is indicated and no more. A man should give unto a fifth of his possessions, but no more lest he himself become poor and a burden on the community. No one helps his fellowmen by becoming poor himself. The master of Christianity, realizing the moral danger involved in wealth, urged men to abandon possessions and to adopt poverty as a way of life for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. That is not bad counsel if you believe that the age is practically finished, that a new order of society is about to be introduced by the intervention of God. Therefore, anything which in any way hampers a man in achieving quick purification is desirable, but Judaism was not finished with this world. It was building this world, and while it was not unmindful of the moral hazards involved in wealth - wealth can become idolatrous - it was also not unmindful of the moral hazards of want. Both are severe trials for the soul of man. Therefore, it urged self-discipline upon the rich to use their wealth humbly and to acquire merit through the moral use of it. It urged upon men to put "mamon" to the service of God and not

not to love money so much that one spends his whole life in the pursuit of it to the hurt of his inner spiritual life. "The man who engaged too much in business, that man will never become really wise in the essential wisdom of life."

But while taking this same view about wealth and ownership, Judaism also drives home some basic propositions on the subject of ownership. Judaism recognizes no absolute private ownership. It recognizes no unqualified ownership. There is no inherent right in the absolute possession of anything upon earth. The earth and everything that is on it belongs absolutely to God. What you have and what you hold, you hold as a steward for God and society. It is not yours to do with it whatever you choose to do. And even what you earn by your own efforts is not yours absolutely. (Deuteronomy)

The ultimate ownership - authority - is in the hand of God. And therefore, we find in the Bible certain amazing laws in relation to property - to land, for example. Ownership in land is not absolute, and therefore, cannot be alienated. "And the land shall not be sold into perpetuity for the land belongs to me." (Leviticus). The purpose of the haw, of course, is to avoid the tragic social evil of a landless peasantry, and so the Bibel decrees that no land can be sold forever, but on the 50th year all land sold must revert to the original owner. The only right we have to the land is to use it and to use it wisely. What is ours is ours only in a qualified sense. Even the harvest of the land must to a degree be shared with others - with the poor and the needy, the widows and the orphans. Laws were enacted in Israel whereby the corners of the field must not be harvested so that the poor may come in and take a share of what has been raised with the help of God. And every third year a tithe for the poor was set aside. The reason for it was "that thy brother may live with thee". He may be poor, but he is still thy brother. He has a right to share in what is yours. When you give unto another man, you give the things which belong to God for both the things and you yourself belong to God.

And so, the right of ownership was circumscribed by the rights of others to live in this world of God. An amazing code of social regislation was founded in ancient Israel to protect those who were not owners - thus, the law of the was introduced whereby all debts were cancelled on the seventh year. Interests were forbidden. Those who lent on interest denied the existence of God. All forms of exploitation of the poor by the rich, employee by employee, were bitterly denounced by the prophets of Israel. The rights of labor, the right to a fair wage, the right of labor to a day of rest - those were defined in legislation in ancient Israel.

To sum up, while ownership was not looked upon as evil and the possession of things was not interpreted as robbing anyone of his possessions, and while wealth was not condemned, it was made very clear by our religion that the right to own is justified only by the right to use what you own wisely and socially for the benefit of all.

And this brings us to the subject of Judaism's attitude towards Communism.

There is no Communism advocated in the Bible or in the Talmud. Naturally derived from this principle that private ownership was not evil, there would be no Communistic philosophy advocated by Judaism. There were in Israel from time to time some voluntary Communistic societies, groups of men who voluntarily banded themselves together so as to perfect their spiritual life, and they would share all their goods in common. Such a sect existed between 150 Before the Common Era and 7 of the Common Era - the Essenes. And Josephus in his "Bellum Judaicum" describes this sect of the Essenes. It might be of interest to you to acquaint yourselves with this unique group which existed among our people and which was communistic in structure but very much unlike the Communism of our day. Josephus xixxix writes as follows:

Among the Jews there are three different schools of philosophy. The Pharisees constitute the first, the Sadducees the second, the so-called Essenes, who live according to unusually severe rules, the third.

(The name is probably derived from Aramaic "asa" (to heal) or can mean "hasayya" (the devout).

These latter are also Jews by birth, but among themselves they are united through love, more than the others. They shun sensual delights as they shun sin, and they behold virtue in continence and the bridling of the passions.

They scorn wealth, and are much to be admired for their community of goods, for there is no one among them who possesses more than another. They have a rule that everyone who wishes to join their sect must give his fortune over to the whole community; thus throughout neither desperate poverty nor excessive wealth prevails, but all share as brothers in the total fortune, made up of the property of the individual members. The administrators of the joint fortune are chosen by a majority vote, and everyone without exception must be prepared to do service for the good of the community.

They have no city of their own, but in every city there are many of them. Membersof the order who come from other places have at their disposal all they find among their fellow members, as though it were their own property, and they enter the houses of persons they have never seen as if they were close friends. And that is why they take nothing with them on a journey, save weapons to protect themselves from robbers. In every city there is a special official whose duty it is to take charge of strangers, to supply them with clothing and all else that they need. They do not buy and sell among one another, rather does each give the other what he needs, and vice versa, receive from him what he himself can use. But each can ask any other member of the order for what he needs, even without giving anything in return.

When the sun is up their superiors send them off to that day's work each one is versed in. When they have labored diligently unto the fifth hour, they come together in a certain place, don a linen cloth, and wash their bodies with cold water.

After this ablution they go to a special building, which no member of another sect may enter, and here, clean as though they were crossing the threshold of a sanctuary, they meet in the dining hall. There they seat themselves quietly and calmly, and the baker sets bread before each in turn, while the cook serves each a single course. Before the meal, the priest pronounces a prayer, and no one may eat before the prayer is said. After the meal he prays again, so that at both the beginning and the end, God is honored as the giver of food. Then, after they have removed their garments, which are as it were holy, they go back to their work until dusk. Then they return and dine in the same manner;

if visitors happen to be there, these share the meal. Neither laud tones nor any other kind of noise ever desecrates the house, but each lets the other talk in his turn. The silence that prevails in this house gives the impression of an awesome mystery to those who are not within it. But the cause of this quiet is nothing but the unbroken sobriety of the members of the order, who enjoy food and drink only until their hunger and thirst are appeared.

The Essenes do nothing save at the express command of their superiors, and in two things alone have they full freedom of action - in giving help to others, and in showing charity. Thus everyone is permitted to come to the aid of those in need of succor, provided they are worthy of it, and to give food to those in want. Loyalty ranks high with them; and they cultivate peace with great concern. To give their word means more to them than to swear an oath; they even desist from swearing, because they regard it as more reprehensible than perjury. They say that he who cannot obtain belief without calling upon God is already condemned.

He who wishes to be taken into this sect is not immediately accepted. First he must live outside the order for a year, in the same way as the members of the order. If, in the course of this year, he passes the test of moderation, he approaches a step nearer to the community: he participates in the cleansing rite of water, but is not yet admitted to the meetings of this order. For after he has given proof of steadfastness, his character is tested for two more years, and only if he appears worthy in this respect also, is he formally received into the order. Before he is permitted to appear at the common meal, he must swear a solemn oath to the members of the order that he will honor God, observe justice toward men, never inflict harm, either of his own volition or at the command of another, that he will always hate the unrighteous and fight the battle of the righteous, and also that he will always act in good faith toward everyone, and especially toward the superiors, because none has office unless Godzix has given it to him. He must also swear that, should he himself ever be in a position of command, he will never abuse his power, nor seek to surpass those subject to him, either in dress or adornments. Furthermore, he obligates himself always to love truth and to expose liars, to keep his hands pure of theft and his soul pure of the taint of unfair profits.

This is an amazing group of spiritual Communists who lived 2,000 years ago in Israel. It was an isolated community. Its membership was quite limited and its Communism was altogether unlike the political materialistic Communism of our day. It was a religious community dedicated to the service of God. This was not an atheistic community, and it was not built through coercion. It was a voluntary association of free men. It was not brought about through the dictatorship of the proletarian. It was a free association of free men who sought a unique way of life for themselves which completely satisfied them. But as I said, this was an isolated instance. The general attitude of authoritative Judaism to the subject of Communism is best expressed by one of the famous Rabbis: "He who says what is mine is mine, and what is thine is thine, is a poor man. On the other hand, he who says

One must help someone. But that is only part of the story. Do good. One must fulfill positive mandates of active participation in the moral life of a community. There is no such thing as "I will mind my business and you mind yours" in the moral life of a people. And what we have whether of intellectual fields or physical possessions, we must share with those who have less, for the rich and the poor have met one another and the Lord is the Maker of them both.

The truly good man has a passion for righteousness, and the word "passion" comes from a word which means "to suffer". He suffers in his efforts to establish greater justice in the world. When he sees slums, that is achallenge to him to do all he can to eliminate them. When he sees a poor man, he does not say, "What is mine is mine, and what is thine is thine," but he seeks to help him. This is the ethical philosophy of Judaism, and I believe at the heart of it is sound guidance for a social order which can give justice to men and at the same time preserve democratic freedom.

When free men look upon what they have as an opportunity to serve and help the economic order in which they live, then there is the possibility of building a Kingdom of God on earth not through dictatorship, but through organized goodwill on the part of free men. When the philosophy of "live and let live" - "love they neighbor as thyself" comes to take hold, we shall be approaching an order of society such as was envisioned by the great prophets of our faith and of all great faiths of mankind, and we shall be spared the horrors through which we have been passing in the last generation or two - because of greed and selfishness on the part, especially of those in power, men have been driven to revolutions, massacres, destruction and evil. Owner or steward - never owner, really - always a steward, and blessed is the faithful steward for he will receive grace from the God who owns all things, even our very lives.

