

THE LINGERING ZEST TO PERSECUTE

This address, delivered at the 174th commencement of Columbia University, June 5, 1928, by President Nicholas Murray Butler, deals with an astonishing present condition:

AT THE close of his monumental History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, the historian Henry Charles Lea offers the reflection that such a review as he has made of the follies and crimes of our ancestors is, when rightly estimated, full of hope and encouragement. Imperfect though they be, the human institutions of today when compared with the past, record an improvement and an advance which are little short of marvelous. We are tempted to lose sight of these encouraging facts when we dwell, as of course from time to time we must, upon the shortcomings of our own generation, and upon what may be called the vestigial remains of older vices, follies and crimes.

Persecution has a long and squalid history. It existed under the Christian Emperors as well as amongst the heathen and among Protestants as well as under the Papacy and the Inquisition. In fact no form of political belief and no form of religious faith appear wholly to have escaped its devastating and debasing influence. Today it seems incredible that Melancthon soberly approved putting Servetus to death for the imputed crime of blasphemy, and that he even went so far as to express wonder whether any one would dissent from his judgment and disapprove that severity. A contemporary, Bucer by name, announced publicly in his pulpit that Servetus should have had his bowels pulled out and been torn to pieces. There would appear to be no limit to the cruelty and to the fanaticism of persecution, no matter what the mild and gentle professions of the persecutors, and no matter what the fundamental principles of their religious faith. It is often the case that those who loudly proclaim their own right to think and speak and act as they

choose are the first to denounce and to persecute those who differ from them.

Our own American ancestors went to incredible lengths in their persecutions and their cruelties. The Statute Books of the 17th and 18th Centuries are filled with astounding enactments which contradict at every turn the fundamental principles professed by those who settled the American colonies and who began to lay the foundation of what is now the government and the social system of the United States. The so-called Blue Laws, which still clutter the statute books of several of the older states, and which occasionally lead some belated fanatic to cry aloud for law enforcement, are the remaining and the tragic evidences of habits and customs of mind and conduct that were once dominant in more American colonies than one. Happily it is a far cry from the New York of 1701 when any priest caught in the colony was doomed to life imprisonment, with the proviso that should he seek to escape he should be shot, and when any Catholic was absolutely forbidden either to vote or to hold public office, to the happier, the freer, the more liberal, and the more truly American New York of 1928. Loudly demanding that they should have freedom to worship God, that freedom was denied time and again by the colonists to those who did not wish to worship God in their particular way.

From time to time we have had more or less significant and temporary revivals of this 17th and 18th Century bigotry. A hundred years ago there sprang up among us the so-called Know Nothing movement, which troubled the public life of the nation until the outbreak of the Civil War. Then, some forty years ago, there grew up like a mushroom the American Protective Association, which was more of a nuisance than a danger while it lasted. Finally, there has come the oddly stupid and unintelligent movement known as the Ku Klux Klan, which stoutly proclaims its belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of

man, provided there be no children and no brothers who are either Catholics or Jews or Negroes. A sense of humor should have protected us from this amazing outbreak. Spreading for a time with rapidity among the markedly less intelligent elements of the population, particularly in small towns and in rural districts, the Ku Klux Klan developed a commercial and coldly material side which hastened its undoing. Sarcasm, ridicule and laughter did the rest.

It is distressing, of course, that the zest to persecute should persist at all. In a society and a state built upon the Bill of Rights, and offering lip service at least to the finest principles and ideals of liberalism as these have been developing for some three hundred years, persecution is oddly out of place. But it appears that liberalism is a hard lesson to learn. Liberty as a personal possession may be highly acclaimed, while liberty as an institution for the protection of all men may at the same moment be violently, even passionately, attacked. Much more than we realize the various outbreaks, legal or other, which aim at uniformities and conformities, at compulsions and at prohibitions, rest upon the lingering zest to persecute. Other reasons and other excuses, quasi-moral or quasi-religious, may be offered, but the real reason is the determination on the part of organized groups to compel their fellow countrymen to act, and if possible, to speak and to think in accordance with their own particular practices and preferences. Those who continue to manifest this zest to persecute are out of touch with the march of progress, are rejecting the example of the life as well as the words of Christ, whose followers they often profess to be, and are flying in the face of the fundamental principles of that American political philosophy to which they give such voluble lip service. It would be an interesting bit of scientific inquiry to ascertain whether that hypocrisy which is just now so widespread among our people is an act, an achievement, or a habit. Perhaps

some experimentation would be needed to settle these questions, but it would be well worth undertaking. A crusade on behalf of temperance, which begins by making temperance a crime is, to say the least, a puzzling phenomenon.

"Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties," said John Milton. This is the doctrine and the only doctrine upon which free government and free society can rest, and which must always and everywhere be insisted upon in a true democracy. Proscriptions, blacklists, demands that individuals be deprived of posts of honor and emolument because of their lack of conformity to some more or less outrageous law or doctrine, or because of their religious faith and opinions, are all vestigial remains of that older and widespread habit of persecution which is now so happily on the wane.

The lingering zest to persecute is a challenge to the 20th century university. In the university at least there is freedom to seek the truth and to proclaim it as found or believed, provided only it be done with scholarly competence, sincerity and good manners. The university becomes in this way the ideal community where men and women move in an atmosphere of freedom, enjoy the stimulus of difference of opinion and of view, and gain the inspiration which only the honest and earnest seeker after truth ever really knows. It is the discharge of this high function which reveals to the public mind the university as a fundamental human institution, serving the noblest of purposes and resisting with calmness and determination every effort to turn back the hands on the face of the clock which marks the passage of that time which measures progress.

Ninety per cent of all the pupils who graduated from the elementary schools of Dallas, Texas, last year entered high schools.