EUGENICS AND THE CHURCH

By THE REV. J. H. F. PEILE

WHEN I had the honour of reading this paper before the Eugenics Education Society, I prefaced it with a few words, which need not be repeated in print, on the opinion that it needed some courage in a clergyman of the Church of England to show publicly a sympathetic interest in the work and aims of the Society. I do not share that opinion: but the mere fact that it can be held and expressed by anyone suggests the question why it should be accounted a remarkable thing that a minister of religion should be interested in the problems which this Society has been formed to study, and should take part in its counsels and discussions. The pages which follow are chiefly occupied with an attempt to answer that question.

I. Our first purpose then is to ascertain the reasons for the Church's reluctance to take up the question of Eugenics. When we say Church in this connexion, we mean, I think, the clergy, not as exclusively forming the Church, but as expressing its average corporate opinion. And as practical persons, we shall do well to contemplate not exclusively an ideal, what the Church ought to be; but the existing fact, what the Church is—with which we have to reckon.

(*A*) First then we must remember that the idea of a Science of Eugenics is to most people a startling novelty. It involves the application of the methods of exact study to conditions which they have hitherto been taught to leave in a twilight of mystery; and proposes in the light of that study to guide and control the working of laws which have hitherto been the especial sphere of Nature; that is to say modified and interfered with at random by fortuitous and irrelevant changes which civilisation has brought into the physical conditions of Mankind. The thought that such study and such control are either desirable or possible

is entirely new to the minds of a large majority even of educated people. On the other hand, no one will deny that the Church is, both intellectually and morally, a stronghold of conservatism and caution. We may say that its characteristic attitude towards new thought is, sometimes, rightly, an attitude of suspense and criticism, sometimes, wrongly, an attitude of uncompromising rejection. Of this conservatism in both its manifestations the clergy as a whole are fairly representative. I suppose what we ask of them is that they should adopt the attitude of suspense and criticism. And here is a reason which holds back clergymen from supporting this movement, namely, that most of the clergy who have active and open minds, and the qualities which cause them to be heard gladly, are exceedingly busy men; and feel that they cannot give to the question the time and study which would justify them in speaking with decision. We must, I think, respect the position that insufficient knowledge on the details of so important a question forbids active support: and content ourselves with a just protest against indiscriminate hostility based on ignorance.

(*B*) There is, however, a stronger cause of reluctance than natural conservatism, a cause so obvious that it needs but few words: but one which cannot be passed over without notice, and must be frankly and courageously faced.

Eugenic Science deals with a subject which at once alarms conventional propriety, and has a most unfortunate attraction for prurient curiosity. It is the task of Eugenics to bring one whole chapter of life out of the shadows of questionable mystery into the daylight of common sense and proper feeling. Our task is to instruct, without offending or tempting, either kind of weaker brethren. Now, of course, in this Society there is no question about honesty and singleness of purpose: but we do need to add to the innocence of the dove something of the wisdom of the serpent.

The presentment of Eugenic truth has not been uniformly without offence: it has been mixed up and, in the popular estimate, identified with things which no Church can possibly touch. The popular estimate may be just or unjust, but it is our business to reckon with it and to correct it if it is wrong.

Again a great deal of the literature of the subject is, to say the least of it, not reassuring to the average lay mind. It is unconciliatory and dogmatic in tone (and the dogmatism of a scientific man with a pet hypothesis passes the dogmatism of theologians) —it deals in terms and phrases which startle the sensibility of the unlearned; and it ignores, or explicitly rejects, a number of things which Church people consider essential.

We may plead that our Society is in no sense responsible for this literature: but we shall get the credit or discredit of it as long as we allow the popular judgment to go by default. And there can be no doubt that a breath of that discredit is a cause of reluctance to join in the Society's work among people who have the cause of religion much at heart.

(*C*) We enquire then how this reluctance can be overcome, this misunderstanding—for it is essentially a misunderstanding —be dissipated.

First, by that most effective weapon of all new causes—the education of Public Opinion: the patient effort to make people understand that these subjects *must* be approached for the sake of humanity and civilisation, and that they *can* be approached frankly and sensibly without danger to morals or good sense. The clergy are after all human beings, that is to a great extent the creatures and servants of their environment. They are, as a class, representative of moderate educated conservatism in thought and feeling: and, as a class, they may also justly be credited with a strong moral sense and a desire for the welfare of their fellow creatures rather more earnest and conscious than the average. But they are not as a rule specially qualified to introduce to the minds of their congregations novelties of thought for which they are not fully prepared. It is by the general enlightenment and conciliation of the intellectual class to which they belong that the clergy can best be enabled to take on this subject a definite line, which would probably be neither safe nor expedient till the ground is prepared by the gradual spread of information.

Second, this purpose of informing and conciliating public opinion can best be attained by the setting forth a clear statement of the objects and methods of the Society. This has in fact been

already done in a paper from which I need not quote, as it is well known to all members of the Society. It should, however, be circulated as widely as possible among those who are not yet members, since it furnishes a complete answer to the stock objections which are commonly urged against any attempt in the direction of Eugenics.

Third, if we desire to secure the support of the moral force of the Church, stress must be laid upon the intellectual and moral character of the aims of the Society. When Eugenic Science deals with human beings it is plain that the physical side cannot really be separated from the moral and intellectual, or seriously viewed except as a necessary condition of the intellectual and moral improvement of the stock: but it has undoubtedly been thrown into prominence by some writers, as though it were an end in itself: and in an age when material well-being is too often regarded as the sole attainable good, there is a danger that the low ideal of merely physical betterment may catch the fancy of the vulgar, and by excluding higher ideals, may repel the philosopher and alarm the moralist.

II. All that I have said so far, amounts in effect to this, that the true aims of the Eugenics Education Society ought to be put clearly before the minds of clergy and Church people. Those aims, definitely stated, merely extend a principle to which the Church is already committed: the principle that material environment is a factor in spiritual welfare. This is the meaning of the rapid growth of Public School and University Settlements in the poorer parts of our great cities, and of the complicated organisation of Clubs and Societies which now forms so important a part of the Church life in town parishes, and drew from an eminent Anglican layman the half-serious reproach that the clergy are "leaving the Word of God to serve billiard tables." And, in a way which more nearly concerns the objects of this Society, the same principle underlies the whole of the philanthropic effort, so closely and so honourably connected with Christian Religion, for the care of the helpless and suffering. Hospitals, Orphan Homes, institutions for the care of the feeble-minded, and all the many agencies for the relief and alleviation of poverty and infirmity, obtain an amount of support from

Christians as such, which plainly testifies that the Church is willing and anxious to do everything in its power for children as soon as they are born, to fit them for the battle of life and for the Kingdom of Heaven: which to the Christian are two ways of expressing the same thing. But Science, which is simply the trained and co-ordinated observation of facts, teaches us that pre-natal conditions are in a large proportion of cases as important as post-natal: and it follows that the duty is to prevent the causes rather than to alleviate the results of physical and intellectual degeneracy.

I have said that the contemplation of this side of the Church's work, what may be called its therapeutic side, nearly concerns the objects of this Society: and it leads us in fact directly to the startling paradox, which on consideration appears to be a truism, that Philanthropy with the aid of modern science has become one of the great contributory causes of the condition of Cacogenics, the producing of bad and ineffectual citizens, which it is the purpose of the Society to mend, and if possible to end. People sometimes ask us why, if Eugenic Science is such a beneficent and necessary thing, the world has managed to get on without it up to the beginning of the twentieth century A.D. And the answer is that the rapid advance of medical science in the last hundred years has combined with humanitarian sentiment to suspend the operation of the law of the elimination of the unfit, by which Nature maintains racial progress and checks racial degeneration. So long as Nature was left to herself to work out the problem in her own way she could be trusted to select for parentage the best types and the best individuals. The methods which she employs may appear to us crude and wasteful, carried out at the cost of an amount of suffering which neither our instinct nor our reason will tolerate if we can prevent it: but at the same time we must admit that those methods were effective for their purpose and that the laws of natural selection and the survival of the fittest did maintain at whatever cost a gradually rising standard in the offspring from generation to generation.

What we know of the earlier civilisations shows that they did little to interfere with the free operation of those laws and

in some cases they appear to have worked deliberately on the same lines, though as a rule perhaps with as little conscious purpose as Nature herself. We read that in ancient Sparta weak and sickly infants were allowed to die without any effort being made to keep them alive. Here there appears to have been a conscious intention of preventing the degeneration of a fighting stock in which physical strength and endurance were qualities necessary for the safeguarding and preservation of the society. But it is not necessary to go to a special instance like this. The natural law was everywhere strong enough to maintain itself so long as no particular care and trouble were taken to preserve the lives of the mentally and physically inferior from the conditions which tend to eliminate them. But two great causes which interfere with this elimination were absent from every pagan civilisation. One of them has only come into full effect within the memory of our own generation. These two causes, as I have suggested above, are (1) the Christian sentiment which teaches the absolute importance of every human life, and regards the relief of suffering and the care of the sufferer as the first of human duties, and (2) the medical zeal and skill, which from quite another point of view regards the saving of a life as an end in itself, and is in our time able, by means of a reasonable and patient system of hygiene and therapeutics, to preserve and bring to maturity a vast number of sickly lives which would never have come into existence in really natural conditions, and would have been rapidly cut off in the environment of a pre-sanitary civilisation. Thus it has come about that those who regard the welfare of the race from the eugenic standpoint have to consider an entirely new factor which has not been present, at any rate to an appreciable extent, in previous epochs of the world's history: that is the existence of a great army of mental and physical imbeciles, who are in the strictest sense artificially kept alive, without regard to the eugenic interests of the nation, and one may almost say without regard to their own interest. To these a humane and civilised criminal law adds another contingent of the morally imbecile, what we call the habitual criminal; perhaps not a very numerous class, but one which is a serious danger to society, because, as experience has already shown,

it is capable of reproducing its type with exact fidelity, and there is already something more than a danger of the growth of a criminal tribe within the nation, which not only threatens our lives and property, but continually infects and demoralises the fringe of the normal stock which inevitably comes in contact with it. We must mention, too, another type of moral and physical imbecile which appears to be a product of our economic system, the so-called unemployable: for in this age of specialisation we find this class of specialists, whose speciality it is to be able to do nothing in particular, and to prefer to do very little of that. Now I need not tell you that it has become a very urgent question how we are to deal with the immediate existing generation of these various types of imbecile. With regard to one of them, the unemployable, it has been discovered that indiscriminate charity does not alleviate the evil but increases it: and this discovery perhaps suggests the principle which will have to guide the whole treatment of the ineffective and degenerate. I do not for a moment propose anything like a return to the inhuman indifference of the non-Christian period. It would be in the first place highly immoral. The spirit of tenderness for suffering, and the sense of duty to sufferers, are an ethical asset which the human race cannot afford to lose. In the second place it would be impossible. The general conscience, trained by generations of Christianity, would justly rise in revolt against such a cynical suggestion: and finally, given the other conditions and complications of a civilised life which remove almost the whole population from anything like a natural environment, it would be more disastrous than the blindest gropings of philanthropy. But it *is* possible and necessary that philanthropy, with its ally medical science and knowledge, should be guided by prudence and foresight to look beyond the individual case to the larger issues of the future. It is assuredly the duty of a Christian society on the one hand to treat with forbearance, wisdom, and firmness, those who by no fault of their own have come into the world so heavily handicapped in the race of life: but, on the other hand, it is an even more urgent duty to provide if possible that the children of the generations to come shall be born with such equipment of

qualities, physical, mental, and moral, as will make it reasonably possible for them to grow up useful and happy citizens.

III. It would appear then that the Church as such is committed, and has indeed already by its social action confessed its obligation to the principles of Eugenic science. We must now pass to the consideration of the methods a Church can best use to carry out those objects: and here I am afraid I am going to be intensely discouraging, in fact uniformly so with a single reservation which I shall prudently keep for the end of my paper. Enthusiastic Eugenists have pointed out to me that the Church possesses a system of life-long instruction which might well be directed to the enlightenment and conviction of Church people on this important subject, but I am afraid that for the present the sphere of its effective use is extremely limited.

(*a*) Eugenic education of the young, if it is to have its due effect, must always find its place rather in the Day School than in the Sunday School. It is commonly admitted that moral teaching and the practical side of religious teaching are best given to children by the regular teachers from whom they are accustomed to receive instruction in other subjects; and in this particular subject it is absolutely necessary that the instructor should be a trained teacher, and one who possesses some degree of genuine scientific knowledge of what is on one side a highly technical subject. Anything like vague and amateur teaching would be not only useless but positively dangerous; and further, from the parish clergyman's point of view the time which can be given to Sunday School is none too much for training the children in some knowledge of the literature and history of their religion.

(*b*) The time of Confirmation has been suggested as a time for the beginnings of eugenic teaching. Here we get back at once to the necessity of educating general public opinion. At present I am sure the vast majority of parents would resent anything of the kind; the vast majority of clergymen who are preparing children for Confirmation would be neither qualified nor willing to undertake such a task; and in this case again the time is fully occupied with teaching more immediately germane to the matter in hand. In both these cases, the school and confirmation, it may fairly be said that when public opinion is sufficiently

educated to make some degree of eugenic teaching a regular part of the curriculum of school training—and not till then—will the Church be able to enforce the ethical aspects of eugenic duty as a part of its spiritual teaching.

(*c*) When we pass from the consideration of children to the case of grown-up people, it might naturally be supposed that the pulpit would prove an effective instrument for the spread of enlightenment and common sense on these topics and so to a certain extent it may, and I hope it will. But here again the sphere of usefulness is strictly limited. A course of sermons from a great preacher or an authoritative pronouncement from some leader of religious opinion would doubtless have an effect, probably in immediate protest and opposition, but ultimately in a profitable clearing of the air: but a casual sermon from a clergyman with no special claim to be heard on a difficult subject would, I think, unless he happened to be an unusually discreet and learned minister, probably do more harm than good: and that because the sermon is not the best form in the present age for argument and exposition of this kind. In our day the printed word reaches a far larger audience and has a more permanent effect than the spoken word. New thought is best promulgated, not from the pulpit, but by literature of all kinds, in newspapers, in magazines, in light and attractive books, in serious and scientific treatises: and when the spoken word is the medium it gets a readier and more receptive hearing from the platform at meetings, if one can only get the outside public to come to them: and probably best of all in personal conversation: and it is there that the clergy, with the influence that their position gives them, could really help: and it is unquestionably the duty of clergymen to take such interest, and to acquire such a degree of knowledge on an important subject like this, as will enable them to speak the word in season with authority and power. They are not justified in letting the thing alone, or in adopting without enquiry the popular prejudice which dismisses it as impossible. If they are, as they ought to be, spiritual and intellectual guides to some part of their congregation, they cannot honestly take refuge either in ignorance or indifference.

(*d*) And now to come to the reservation of which I spoke. The Church has always claimed a right to regulate the marriage of its members, and the marriage service of our Church declares in terms so plain spoken that they offend some delicate ears, that one of the purposes of marriage is the production of satisfactory children. The Church still possesses in some degree the power which is represented by this claim, and it will retain it in proportion as it exercises it wisely and beneficially: but to that end it must exercise it not in an arbitrary way, but in the light of an enlarged and still increasing knowledge of the facts of nature.

(1) There are certain highly technical aspects of the matter, conspicuously the question of the limitation of offspring, on which we cannot expect a religious body as such to make any definite pronouncement. The clergyman who has the necessary knowledge of the subject and the particular knowledge of the individual case may as he thinks right give personal advice and use his authority to enforce right action: but in general it is a matter for the doctor and not for the parson, and it is a question on which the best opinion, both moral and scientific, is still strongly divided.

(2) But in another, and a wider, and therefore more important part of the field of eugenics, opinion is not divided: and the clergy and definitely religious people as such have a great opportunity and duty in the educating of a strong public opinion on the subject of undesirable unions, not only in such extreme cases as the mating for instance of a pair of deaf mutes, a triumph of unenlightened philanthropic effort of which an instance was brought to my notice quite lately with its dreadful results, but in the case of other less obvious physical and mental defects, where marriage is now freely allowed by public opinion, and even admired by sentiment. I am not speaking here of interference in particular cases. That may be a duty, but it is for the person who undertakes it to judge his responsibility and the wisdom of the means he takes to fulfil it: but what it is really desirable to produce is a clear sense of right and wrong on this question, which will make people instinctively shrink from infringing the laws of eugenics instead of instinctively neglecting them as they do at present.

(3) There is a great deal to be done and there is existing machinery to do it,—in the way of teaching women, especially those of the poorer classes, certain simple and acknowledged truths as to the care of infants both before and after birth. There is a great deal to be done, for statistics show that a large proportion of mothers are both ignorant and careless. They need to be taught not only what is the right thing to do but that it is their duty to themselves and to their children to do it; and it must be added that many mothers of the wealthier class are lacking in the sense of duty if not in the opportunity of knowledge. Instruction of this kind is being given, and should be given to a much greater degree, and by persons carefully chosen for their knowledge and power to teach, both in Parish Mothers' Meetings, and more especially through the excellently organised machinery of the Mothers' Union.

I may sum up all that I have said in a single paragraph. If we do not wish to court disappointment, we shall not expect the Church to lead in what is a very technical and hitherto a much controverted question. We can and do ask from the Church a calm and impartial consideration of our arguments, and encouragement and support to well-considered action in what is proved to be true and beneficial to the race.