

THE THING MUST NOT OCCUR AGAIN

This column will continue, if it does continue, because others share my delight in finding anecdotes that place aspects of Methodist history in the framework of their eras. In this instance the Methodist event is the organization in December 1907 of the Methodist Federation for Social Service—now known as the Methodist Federation for Social Action. And the anecdotes come from *The Proud Tower* by Barbara Tuchman.

According to Tuchman, Queen Victoria was returning on her yacht from a visit to Ireland in 1900, when a particularly strong wave buffeted the ship. Sending for her physician, she said, "Go up at once, Sir James, and give the Admiral my compliments and tell him the thing must not occur again."¹ But the waves continued to bound. And the waves that refused to obey Her Majesty were social and religious as well as aqueous.

There was a swelling tide of indignation against the exploitation of persons and the degradation of cities. Riding this tide were the five organizers of the Methodist Federation for Social Service—Frank Mason North, Herbert Welch, Elbert R. Zaring, Worth M. Tippy and Harry F. Ward. They wanted to stimulate "study of social questions by the church, side by side with practical social service, and to bring the church into touch with neglected social groups."²

Such efforts to awaken the church were part of a gathering storm of resentment against the kind of piety exemplified by Lord Overtoun, who paid workers at his Glasgow chemical factory three or four pence an hour for a twelve-hour day, seven days a week. They ate lunch standing at the furnaces, and if they took Sunday off were fined the next day's wages. Yet his Lordship gave ten thousand pounds a year to charity and was a leading member of the Sunday Observance and Sunday Rest societies.³

Christians who tried to defend the Lord Overtouns of Britain and America found that the waves of social unrest would not obey them. Neither would the 1908 Methodist Episcopal General Conference. It adopted a Social Creed drafted by Harry Ward, in which the sweating of workers to provide luxuries for the rich was deplored. An example of conspicuous consumption is what happened at a party given for Nellie Melba at the Savoy. Perfect peaches, a delicacy of the season, were served to the guests, but they were so sated that they made a game of throwing them at passers-by beneath the windows.⁴

¹Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890-1914*, New York, Bantam Books, 1967; p. 69.

²Quoted by Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1961; p. 321.

³Tuchman, *op. cit.*, pp. 416f.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 78f.

Recognizing that there was something fundamentally immoral about plutocrats starving their workers in order to buy throwaway food, the founders of the Methodist Federation for Social Service cut religious channels for the flowing tide of social protest. They raised their voices against Christian leaders who encouraged moguls to endow Sabbatarian societies instead of admonishing them to treat their workers fairly. After they succeeded in getting the Social Creed adopted in 1908, no member of the Methodist Episcopal Church could in good conscience tell workers seeking a living wage, "The thing must not occur again."

The anecdote from which that phrase is taken and the others mentioned in this column help the Methodist historian place the founding of the Methodist Federation for Social Service on the waves of a tide of social protest that no sovereign voice could halt.

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