

A PRIEST'S RIGHT OF PROTEST

FATHER HICKSON AND THE *N.Z. TIMES*

STINGING COMMENT BY A CHRISTCHURCH PAPER

In the *New Zealand Times* (Wellington) there appeared, on January 26, a long letter to the editor by a Jewish correspondent named Coleman Phillips. The letter was written apropos of the Messina earthquake, but the earthquake was merely made a peg on which to hang a violent diatribe on Christ and Christianity and prayer. Thus, the Saviour of the world was declared to be wrong 'in nearly all His moral teaching'; sneers are cast at 'an impossible God beyond the stars'; Christian 'sermons and prayers' are declared by this non-Christian dogmatist to be 'useless,' 'mumbo-jumbo' stuff, and 'degrading superstition'; the God of the Bible is pronounced 'inexorable'; there is a cheap pun at the name of the 'Saviour'—the pun being emphasised by the printing of that great name with inverted commas; 'civilisation,' says this Hebrew, 'advances not because of Christianity, but in spite of it'; and 'priest and parson' are, in tantamount terms, denounced alike as tyrants, self-seekers, and hypocrites. This coarse diatribe against Christian faith and sentiment elicited the following protest from the Rev. Father Hickson, and this, in turn, led to the further correspondence which is set forth thereunder:—

Archbishop's House, Hill street, Wellington,
January 28, 1909.

The Managing Director, *N.Z. Times* Company.

Dear Sir,—A letter appeared in the *New Zealand Times* of January 26 signed 'Coleman Phillips,' to the publication of which as a subscriber I must take strong exception. In fact, if anything further of the same nature were to appear, I should have to seriously consider the advisability of counselling those under my care not to admit your paper into their homes. I do not say this exactly by way of threat, but rather to indicate to you how pernicious I believe to be the publication of such matter.

I should be pleased to have a statement from you in answer to this letter.

I am, your truly,

JAS. HICKSON, S.M., Administrator.

Wellington, January 29, 1909.

Rev. Father Hickson, Hill street, City.

Dear Sir,—I have the honor to acknowledge your favor of January 28, and to mark contents thereof. If you will allow your communication to be published, I, on my part, will undertake to furnish adequate reasons for allowing fullest discussion in the public press, especially when the proper name of the writer is attached. That is what is meant by the freedom of the press. If you disagree with the views of any writer in these columns it is quite competent for you to place your protest on record. If I hear of any instance in which you 'counsel those under your care not to admit the paper into their homes' I will take such steps as will be calculated to preserve its interests, and at the same time expose the peculiar tactics to which you have threatened to resort. In the absence of your expressed wish to the contrary, I propose to publish your letter of January 28, and this my reply thereto.

I remain, yours sincerely,

THE MANAGING EDITOR.

Archbishop's House, Wellington,

January 31, 1909.

The Managing Editor, *N.Z. Times*.

Dear Sir,—In the light of your answer to my letter of 28th inst., I desire to say that I have not the slightest objection to your publishing my communication, provided your reply be appended. In that case, I would ask you to add this letter of approval. I should like also to say that, much as I recognise and value the great power for good that is exercised by a large section of the press, I do not for a moment concede that 'freedom of the press' implies the opening of your columns to an unbridled attack on the tenets of all your Christian readers.

Furthermore, if you circulate through the medium of your paper, be it only as part of a letter, the statement that 'Christ was absolutely wrong in nearly all His moral teaching' (see your issue of January 26), you must not be surprised if those who are privileged to be called Christ's shepherds show themselves alert and no hirelings.

I am, yours truly,

JAS. HICKSON, S.M.

Wellington, February 1, 1909.

Rev. Father Hickson, Hill street, City.

Dear Sir,—I am glad to receive your letter of the 31st ult., in which you state you have no objection to the publication of your letter. That clears the way for an explanation of the attitude I have taken up. In the first place, let me say that no objection could be taken to your personal protest against the publication of Mr. Coleman Phillips's letter. Many people would agree with you that that communication, though extremely thoughtful and valuable in some respects, was vitiated by an intolerant attitude towards commonly-accepted theological views. Some people might agree with Mr. Phillips in his unorthodox contentions. The great majority would not. The publication of such a letter as an anonymous contribution might reasonably have been objected to by any one of our readers, but when it appeared over Mr. Phillips's signature it then became nothing better nor worse than one man's particular point of view. The practice of modern journalism is to give the freest play to individual opinions in signed articles on any subject. The reader may weigh the writer's contentions against his own views and experiences, and accept or reject them at will. The editor who mutilates a signed article is taking upon himself an unpardonable liberty. He should either accept or reject the article in its entirety, or refer it back to the writer for emendation. It was not thought necessary to do so in this case, but while admitting your right as a subscriber to protest against the publication of Mr. Phillips's letter, I did, and do, take strong exception to your threat. An intimation by a priest that he will 'seriously consider the advisability of counselling those under my care not to admit your paper into their homes' presupposes, first, that the individual members of your congregation are unfitted by lack of intelligence or education to determine for themselves what they shall accept or reject as true or false in the large mass of matter with which they are familiarised by perusal of the daily newspapers, and, secondly, that you have a right to dictate to them not only as to what they shall read, but also as to which newspaper they shall take into their homes. Pardon me for suggesting that this is a very ill-advised attitude for any priest or leader to take up. Time was when certain individuals and sects arrogated to themselves the right to dictate to those less enlightened what they were to know and believe, but in these days any such presumption would be met with stern resentment. Men and women can no longer be treated as ignorant children. Our educational systems make for a rapid spread of knowledge. People are taught to think and act for themselves, and the newspaper which is capable of the greatest service to the community is that which fearlessly opens its columns to a free expression of public opinion on all subjects. The truth is mighty, and will prevail, and a writer will be judged by his veracity and breadth of view, or otherwise, as the case may be. To circumscribe writers to orthodox views is to close the human imagination within four walls. This is no longer practicable or desirable. On the contrary, it is absolutely wrong. The heterodoxies of to-day become the orthodoxies of to-morrow, and though writers should at all times so couch their language as to avoid giving pain and offence, those who present new points of view are public benefactors. This is not said in endorsement of Mr. Coleman Phillips's contribution, which is in direct antagonism to the point of view of the writer, but in confirmation of the argument that no man who has the courage of his convictions should be denied the expression of them in the public press. This is why I, as a journalist, take exception to your threat, and why I have asked permission to be allowed to place this correspondence on record.

I remain, yours sincerely,

THE MANAGING EDITOR.

A STINGING COMMENT BY A SECULAR PAPER.

The following comment on the correspondence reproduced above appeared as a leading article in the *Lyttelton Times* (Christchurch) of February 3, under the heading 'Newspaper Correspondence':—

'A nice point in the ethics of newspaper correspondence is raised in the exchange of views between the Rev. Father Hickson and the editor of the *New Zealand Times*. We are naturally not disposed to intervene between the Wellington journalist and his critic, but the discussion gives us an opportunity to clear up one or two matters on which newspaper readers are not generally well informed. In our own view the publication of Father Hickson's letter was inexcusable. The traditions of British journalism draw a very sharp line between the correspondence of the business side of a newspaper and the literary side, and even when the manager and the editor of a journal happen to be the same individual, he is not entitled to continue in the columns of the newspaper a discussion commenced privately with the commercial office. The matter of the controversy, however, is admittedly of wide public interest. The idea