

CONTEMPORARY RELIGION

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ALL creation bespeaks the praise of its Creator and man craves union with his Maker and God. Who is to lead him, who is to direct him, that his aspirations may be fulfilled? This is the problem that confronts the leaders of our secular universities. Everyone who faces the issue squarely is desirous of a solution knowing that the future of our nation and civilization are at stake.

Youth has always been generous. It teems with life, it senses the worth-while things of life, and would gladly spend itself in the realization of its ideals if only it were made clear that the values of spiritual life are just as real as, and far more vital in human progress than, the material world which engulfs our physical senses. In some vague, intangible sort of a way, youth comes in contact with, and gets a passing glimpse of, the ultimate significance of man's existence. For a time it breathes more quickly, the higher aspirations are fired, and it would feign follow, consecrating its life to the fulfillment and propagation of these spiritual realities. It casts about for leadership and direction. Hoping for victory in its quest it gives itself to various youth movements. Youth is in quest of truth, of service for others, and above all of that intimate union with God which alone can give peace to the soul.

Youth has the inalienable right to expect sympathetic encouragement. This should be given without stint or misgiving. Enthusiastic as youth is, it needs the experience of age; it needs its ideals; it needs to have the way marked out for it on this high road of romance that will lead to the fuller life. And what does it receive? Instead of being educated to think and see the rational basis for the fundamental verities of religion, it is told that religion is an ineffable experience whose intellectual expression can only be symbolical. In consequence, the most varied opinions in the religious sphere are held to be compatible with a fundamental unity of life. Youth is told that theology may vary, but that religion remains the same.

The establishment of experience as the supreme criterion of

truth, and of values, is the crux of the anti-intellectual tendency of the modern world. Nor is it a trifling thing. Its fruits are the logical outcome of roots that go deep into the entire philosophical development of modern times. Ever since the days of Kant, modern philosophy, together with the theology that it has influenced, has had as its dominant note a depreciation of reason and a sceptical answer to the question "What is truth?" The attack has been conducted by men of marked intellectual power, nevertheless it has been an attack on the intellect. The logical results are being evidenced everywhere, even in the sphere of practice. The marked characteristic of the present day is a lamentable intellectual decline in all fields of human endeavor except those that deal with purely material things. The intellect has been brow-beaten so long and so consistently, that it is not surprising that it is now ceasing to function in practise. Feeling and experience are now the criterions of truth and morality. What will happen when men begin to doubt the validity of their feelings?

We hear much of the intellectual strides of today. Reason is said to reject superstitions and outworn dogmas of the past. This is the temper of many university-trained men. The trouble with the thought of today is that there is not enough thought. The trouble with university graduates is, not that they are too original, but rather, that they are not half original enough. All tend to go the same routine way like a flock of sheep. A demagogue, "expert," or "protagonist" of some special cause, knowing the responsiveness of youth, exploits his pet theories among the student body. He makes use of old stock phrases. His hearers swallow whole whatever is given them. They then imagine that they are bold, daring, independent and original because they abuse what everyone else is abusing, especially if this be the religion of Christ.

A man can not be original in his subject unless he knows what the subject is. True originality is invariably preceded by patient attention to facts; it calls for a trained mind that is able to think. Yet this patient attention to facts, this training of the mind through logic and philosophy, is being neglected by the pedagogue of today. 'Tis passing strange that anyone would believe that he can think when he has no premises to begin with, and nothing to think about. Is it any wonder that the world is adrift in a maze of doubt and chaos when it is not even cognizant of the rational grounds for belief in God, the spirituality and immortality of the soul, and kindred truths that should be part and parcel of the education of the lowliest in life? Contemporary thought, on such questions as these, is as confused to-

day as was the thought of mankind prior to the advent of Christianity. Man is roaming at large. He seems as helpless as he was after the fall and antecedent to his redemption by Christ.

The exaltation of the *ego*, and anti-intellectualism and pragmatism of our times, has produced a strange conglomeration of contradictions that find their birth in the teachings of such leaders as Luther, Descartes, Hume and Kant. A deo-centric world had referred all things back to God as the First Cause and the Author of all things; it was a world that thought of man in terms of God and man. Luther's revolt and his individualism sowed the seeds of a homo-centric world which was to think in terms of man and God. Luther is credited with restoring man to his proper dignity, yet a reading of Luther shows that for him man was but "a lost lump." Luther paved the way in theology. Descartes carried on his work, unknowingly no doubt, within the realms of reason, so that Descartes, who is credited with having restored man's reason to him, actually denied reason by asserting that man has only one process of mind by which to attain truth, that is through intuition. Descartes destroyed the rational ground and basis of faith by making the infinite something irrational, saying that it was beyond the limits of human reason. He wished to honor God by placing Him beyond the intelligible. Reason, therefore, was not a preparation for faith, nor was faith for him the perfection of reason.

That the rationalism of this period "ultimately made its home with Protestantism rather than the older communion, was not because the former was in principle more tolerant of divergent views, but because the divisions within the Protestant ranks made greater tolerance a necessity."¹ Locke, Berkeley and others made their contributions. However, it is to Hume that we may trace most modern sceptical arguments. He denied causality; our contemporaries follow him, hold his views, and quote him as though he had exploded the principle of causality. More than this he made a complete denial of all transcendental and moral truths, for assuming that we cannot know causes, he argued that we cannot rise above experience, and therefore cannot rise to any knowledge of God who is beyond our experience; and if He exists, being perfect, He cannot be known by the imperfect.

Kant following Hume tried hard to save pietism from scepticism only to further depreciate reason. He denied all proofs for the ex-

¹ A. C. McGiffert, Union Theological Seminary, *Protestant Thought Before Kant*, p. 187.

istence of God in so far as they were based on reason. He transferred our knowledge of God to his categorical imperative—a gratuitous assumption that lacked a solid rational foundation. Kant's influence has probably gone further, and certainly has been more disastrous, than he had expected.

The individualism and the revolt of Luther, the rationalism and *ego* of Descartes, the scepticism of Hume, and Kant's supposed annihilation of the proofs for the existence of God, paved the way for the philosophical and religious errors of today. Pragmatism has now usurped the throne of reason. Pragmatism says that truth is something relative. Anti-intellectualism changes its theories continually and reiterates that we cannot know truth. Science has been divinized. It is made the infallible guide in all spheres of human life even though her dictum of today may be denied on the morrow. Science changes its hypotheses daily, nevertheless its devotees insist on explaining God, religion and life in terms of the current hypothesis. Following Darwin, the scientists attempted to explain everything in terms of evolution. The coterie that has taken up the relativity of Einstein wishes to explain everything in terms of relativity. Psycho-analysis attempts to explain away the supernatural in terms of pathology, physiology and psychology. The scientists in changing their hypotheses aim at truth as something that can be attained. Truth can be attained in science, but they will not admit final truth in religion. All the while we hear much talk about progress. Apparently the world has forgotten that progress involves something to progress from and something to progress to. If according to anti-intellectualism we can not know truth, and according to the pragmatist one doctrine is as good as another, then where is progress? What have we progressed from, and towards what are we progressing?

A brief consideration of the religious opinions of some of the leading men of today, many of them at our secular universities, will give us an index to the *progress* that is being made. We shall also see the thought on which our youth is being nourished. Much of this thought will certainly seep down to the masses of the next generation.

The sociological group of philosophers, led by Durkheim in France, Wundt in Germany, Sellars, Ames, and Ellwood in America, explain God as society divinized. Some of them argue

that we cannot prove the existence of God; others say that we have progressed in our idea and notion of God with the result that we no longer believe in being subject to any autocratic power; all sum up religion as a service of humanity. Such is the religion of humanitarianism which is being propagated by many of the leaders of the Protestant seminaries in Europe and America.

The psychological explanation of religion, for a large group of psychological philosophers, sees no need of postulating God as the supreme object of religion. This school received its impetus in a large measure from William James, who held that God was for each man, just what each man wished Him to be; moreover God was not infinite, but finite. This school contends that it can explain religion without God as we Scholastics understand and know Him. Bertrand Russell reduces religion to simply finite objects looked at infinitely; Santayana saw religion as the effect of balked tendencies; Moxon and others refer to it as a sex ecstasy; MacDougall accounts for it as a fusion of primary instincts; A. G. Tansley considers it a mental projection; and the school of Leuba and psycho-pathologists hold that even mystical experience is fundamentally physiological and its psychic and so-called metanoetic characteristics are hallucinations.

The current philosophical concept of God, as comprehended by advocates of emergent evolution, is probably best seen in the works of Professor S. Alexander of Manchester University, England, and Professor Alfred North Whitehead of Harvard. The God of Professor Alexander's *Time, Space and Deity* is very much like the pantheistic God of Spinoza although he has exchanged Space and Time for Spinoza's extension and thought. His work bears the impress of Bergson. In the last analysis, Alexander's Philosophic system is pantheistic. His God is in evolution, He is of the temporal order and is constantly emerging; hence God is not infinitely perfect, for His perfections increase with those of the universe. "And it is, I believe, felt (though perhaps I am misled by philosophical prepossessions) as the sense that we also help to maintain and sustain the nature of God and are not merely His subjects; that God Himself is involved in our acts and their issues, or, as was put above, not only does He matter to us, but we also to Him."² Elsewhere he says, "God is . . . in the strictest sense not a creator, but a creature."³

² S. Alexander, *Time, Space and Deity*, II, p. 388.

³ S. Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 398.

Professor Whitehead has made a timely protest against the emotional interpretation of religion made so popular by William James. He has endeavored to place religion on a metaphysical basis. At times he seems close to the Scholastic and Christian idea of God, but he repeatedly shows the influence of Alexander's concept of a Space-Time God although he does not use the same terminology. For Whitehead, the world depends upon God, and God also depends upon the world; God perfects us and we help to perfect God; and "Religion is world-loyalty."⁴

Summing up the modern notion of religion we see that the world believes that it can have religion without God. Humanitarianism thinks that humanity has become disinterested in a personal God and a supernatural world; consequently it is devoting all its efforts towards making this a better place to live in—this world is to be man's paradise. Its slogan is service of mankind, and service for humanity. Psychology believes that it can explain religion and religious experience without God. Science believes that the traditional notion of religion has been founded upon a false conception of the universe. It is firm in its belief that man cannot rise above physical facts; hence man cannot know God. Despite their words to the contrary, it is patent that man is very much interested in God. The vast array, and the intellectual calibre of the men who are endeavoring to solve the problem of man's relation to his Creator but prove man's instinctive need of God and of religion that will place him in attune with his Maker. "Thou hast created us for Thyself, O God, and our heart is restless until it reposes in Thee."

William James has said that "The truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, "works" best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses."⁵ Accepting this criterion, there is one religion, and only one that satisfies the test—the religion of Christ as taught by the Church that He founded. It "works" best today, it has worked best ever since its foundation by God Himself in the person of His Divine Son, Jesus Christ. Countless sects have been formed, sections have broken away from the Church He instituted; their attempts have all proved abortive. As a result untold numbers have been estranged from their God, untold numbers are being told that He does not exist. The Church is like a John the Baptist, "a voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare ye the way of the Lord, make

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, p. 60.

⁵ William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York, 1897), preface p. xii.

straight His paths." God came unto His own and His own knew Him not. The world is seeking God but fails to turn to her who stands in its midst and speaks His message, sealed with His divinity and authority. The world must return to God or it will be lost. We must lead the world back to God and we must begin our work by giving our philosophy and theology to the youth of today.

Men are not as beasts of the field, who are born, live for a while, and then are as though they were not. The world must be taught the dignity of man. St. Thomas Aquinas anticipated the needs of our times precisely because truth and man's nature are essentially the same in all ages. He has the answer to the errors of today. Nine out of every ten so-called new ideas are simply old mistakes; mistakes which man will make over and over again as long as he is left to himself. Aquinas has met these mistakes in his *Summa Theologica* where he also gives a thorough treatise on the nature and dignity of man, and man in relation to his God. He distinguishes between man in the natural order and the truths that he may know there, and man in the supernatural order and the truths that he may further know by the light of faith. Faith is the perfection of reason. The supernatural is the perfection of the natural. Man, fashioned to the image and likeness of God, is endowed with an intellect and will. By the natural light of his intellect alone, man can know the existence of God, the spirituality and immortality of his soul. Before the reception of faith, human reason can and ought to know the fact of revelation from the motives of credibility, especially from miracles.

Treating of man's moral life, the Angelic Doctor delineates the nature of the natural virtues, their properties, increase, and the value of these acquired virtues in the exercise of the infused virtues. He further shows that through the fall of man, mankind had need of the saving, healing grace of the Redemption.

In speaking of man's need of grace the Doctor of the Schools teaches not only as a philosopher but preeminently as a theologian. Having demonstrated that man in his natural state can and ought to know God by his reason, and would thus long to know his Creator more intimately, he reveals to us in what manner we are made sons of God through grace. The world has sought to bring God to man by making Him a creature or by humanizing Christ. Aquinas unfolding the teachings of Christ shows conclusively that God intended to bring man to Him by divinizing him through grace and the merits of the Redemption. Christ stooped to our level that He might lift us to His own. Such is the effect of God's grace which the world

has rejected together with all that is supernatural. And in the Eucharist, we are permitted to receive our Lord and God that we might be one with Him. Through the Gifts of the Holy Ghost we are led on to spiritual heights and intimacies with God Himself that transcend the flight of the human imagination. God has truly been most generous with man. But the world knows Him not. His message must be preached to the world, especially to the youth that their aspirations and ideals may find realization. Through youth we may hope to save the world. At least we may hope for real progress, a progress that will lead man to a fuller life here and to eternal union with his God and Master.

The contemporary religion of the world and the religion of Christ, as taught by His Church and synthesized by the Angelic Doctor, are as far apart as the poles; nay they are as distant from one another as the finite is from the infinite. Contemporary religion makes man a beast of the field, a clod of humanity doomed to an earthly existence and a return to the dust from which it has him rise. The religion of Christ endows man with a spiritual and immortal soul which partakes of the divine nature itself through the reception of grace. The world is sick, even unto death. It has need of religion as never before. The good which Protestantism had retained from the Catholic Church at its egress has been fast ebbing away. Today, undermined and tottering, the religions of the world are doomed to fall into ruins. The Catholic Church alone stands and towers up into the heights of heaven; she is the only stable thing—all else is in flux.

The world is looking towards the Church in the hope that here it may find its God. The world is eager to understand; the world is dying of spiritual hunger—its soul is gasping in the throes of spiritual death. Who is to preach the Gospel, if we do not? Who is to break the Bread of Life to it? Who is to administer the saving sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction that the world may regain its spiritual health and again live?

There are many periods in the history of Christianity that afford situations analogous to that of our time. We may well study these and apply their methods in so far as they meet present needs. An instance of note was the way in which the Dominican Order met the problem that confronted Spain in the thirteenth century when Spain was being overrun by Jews and Saracens. At the suggestion of St. Raymond Pennafort the Order established a special course of post-graduate studies at certain places where men of talent studied, not

only the languages of their prospective converts, but also their manner of thought, their philosophy and religion. The renowned *Pugio Fidei* of Raymond Martin, O. P., at this period, is one of many valuable works that were produced as effective weapons to overcome the Jewish and Arabian errors. The marked success with which they were able to show those souls, outside the Fold, their need of the Gift of Faith is a matter of history.

Pope Leo XIII's firm grasp on the needs of our age, together with his far-seeing vision, caused him to establish a similar stronghold to meet the errors of the day. Cardinal Mercier accomplished his work well. Louvain has proven a boon to scientific, philosophical and religious thought. We must have more such centers. We must have more men trained and cast in a like mold. For many in the world, Protestantism is synonymous with Christianity. Protestantism and the sects have failed; and not only have they failed, but by their actions they have raised an opposition and resentment that is becoming more powerful. The effects of organized anti-Christian propaganda and persecution have brought dire results in France. There, Catholicism is slowly but surely gaining ascendancy. The youth of France is responding to the ideals that Catholicism has to offer, so that the Church is there again receiving the flower of youth that had not known her in its infancy. Are we going to profit by the lessons that history affords us, or are we going to pass through the persecutions of a France before we give the youth of our nation a solid philosophy, a philosophy that will enable them to carry out the ideals that are ours and will lead them to the True Fold of Christ—the Catholic Church?

