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RELIGION AND WORLD RECOVERY

By H. L. STEWART

An immense moral debasement will set in as soon as religion disappears.

—ERNEST RENAN

*Children of Men—The Unseen Power whose eye
For ever doth accompany mankind
Hath looked on no religion scornfully
That man did ever find.*

*That man must still to some new worship press
Doth in His eye ever but serve to show
The depth of that consuming restlessness
Which makes man's greatest woe.*

—MATTHEW ARNOLD

WE are witnesses of a crisis, if ever there was one, in the affairs of men. And we are not merely *witnesses* of it; everyone of us is responsible, according to the measure of his powers, for the discovery of a way out.

How did we get there? "It is the bankruptcy of Religion", exclaims one sort of interpreter. He is right at least in this sense—that the things we now see happening on every side are just those against which Religion endeavored to guarantee the world. But the criticism neglects this other fact, that the crisis developed in an increasingly *irreligious* period. The guarantee

had been progressively ignored, discarded, derided. Who will argue that the forces determining the States of Europe, while they moved to an orgy of greed and hatred and mutual slaughter, had been religious forces? Rather, through the generation preceding the crisis had we heard chiefly that the religious attitude to life was out of date; that it had given place to the attitude of the economist, the physical scientist, the comparative psychologist, the statesman. It is *their* bankruptcy that is obvious. The places of supreme direction in Russia, in Germany, in Italy had been seized, and for years been held, by men who gloried in their "Secularism." It was by them, at first singly, afterwards combined, that staggering blows to world order were struck.

What, then, is the difference between these two attitudes—Secularism and its religious alternative?

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For thousands of years, in very varied forms (including not only Judaism and Christianity but other religions of the East) the religious way of thinking about life has been distinguishable from the irreligious. A clear difference has been this—that at the basis of all religions worthy of the name there has lain the notion of *duty*: a notion which the manifold irreligions, otherwise unlike, agree in discrediting, loosening, destroying. Mussolini's early pamphlet entitled "There is no Such Person as 'God'" was a fit prelude to his later Fascist propaganda. General Ludendorff's demand that the Christian religion be extirpated in Germany because it would check those passions which the *Reich* should encourage was fulfilled on a great scale by Hitler. Everyone remembers Lenin's poster on the walls of Moscow: "Religion is the Opiate of the Working-Class", but not less significant was his proclamation of a new order, with its motto of licence—"Do as You Like".

Fundamentally, religion rests upon a *belief in absolute values*: belief, that is, that "good" and "evil" differ in themselves intrinsically, not merely as varieties of individual preference or taste. It means homage to "duty", as a thing unchangeable with personal or State caprice; like the homage we pay to a law of nature, not like our fitful coincidence or discord respecting a social fashion of the hour. You cannot *prove* that moral good and evil do so differ intrinsically, to anyone who persists in denying it. If he insists on his own preference for cruelty and

deceit, for recurrent wars and caste privilege, over kindness, truthfulness, peace, equal justice, the argument with him must in the end be given up. Like the argument with one who persists in denying, say, the law of universal causation, and reiterating his belief that things happen "just by chance".

But few do thus intend to deny, though they disregard, the absolute values of conduct, any more than they would deny the absolute necessities of science. Even those who profess such complete moral scepticism are commonly found to exalt some "absolute" of their own, in a manner which implies at least a caricature of the belief they have denied. Mussolini, for example, when he talked about the right of the State to exact sacrifice without limit from the individual; or Hitler when he became rhapsodic about "Blood and Soil". Against both, we of the free countries are quite certain of the sacred rights of *personality* whose denial Mr. Eugene Lyons declared twenty years ago to be the chief sourcee (far deeper than any economic depression) of the woes he saw in Central Europe. The United Nations *Declaration of Human Rights* is the latest manifesto on this issue. But what becomes of personality apart from a religious interpretation of the world? If we are materialists or pantheists or agnostics, what is this but a preference, a fancy, with a touch of egotism in it? We are quite sure it is more than that. Our assurance means, in the end, that at the heart of the Universe this value reigns. And what does that in turn mean but belief in God? The tenacity of the great religions, so surprising those who at intervals for centuries have been making premature pronouncement that they are "dead", has its explanation there.

Unfortunately there is much historical evidence to discredit the hope that religion may, at this perilous time, serve to unite the men and women of good will everywhere. It is notoriously an influence which has often set people at variance. But was it religion, in a genuine sense of the word, that acted so? Was not disappointment due to mistaking the trappings, the vesture, for the reality? These are as various as human temperaments, and to attempt forcing them into a common mould is to risk destroying what is good in each of them. Is there not a discoverable unity in them, somewhere? There is: but it does not consist of any "common element" of belief or ritual. It is not a common element *within* them, it is a common purpose *behind* them, that may and should serve as principle of unity, once we have appreciated it.

Over against the mistake of regarding as the essence of religion what are really its accidents, the casual and varying forms of its activity, there is another and a no less dangerous mistake. It is that of underestimating such "details." They are not the essence of religion, but—like much else that is non-essential—they are concomitants indispensable in practice. This is no paradox: all it means is that the *special* conditions of one sort of Faith are not necessary to another; perhaps not even possible for another; but *some* such conditions are vital everywhere. The religious reunion of mankind has often failed just because of the attempt thus to override and obliterate religious diversity. Not a union which cancels the diversities, but a union expressing itself through them, and the richer for their variety, is the sort which will last.

Coleridge significantly observed that Toleration was an herb of spontaneous growth on the soil of indifference, and that the blend of religions so effected was simple, but not so much a *growing* together as a *freezing* together¹. Like that sterile product known as "citizenship of the world", so sterile when it develops out of contempt for local patriotism! One's religion is thus like one's nationality, which the wise man values not because he judges his own nation superior to all others, but rather because he knows that no nation can afford to dispense with the supplement which others can furnish. He begins with the development of his own, as nearest to him. Charles Sarolea² well pointed out that true national spirit thus comes not from national pride but from national humility. In like manner the religions of the world must approach one another, each having to learn from the rest.

It is by no means out of the question (nor would it involve any real compromise of Christendom if it should be tried) that sympathetic cooperation between Christian leaders and leaders of "the ethnic religions" of the Far East should help to erect a barrier against the materialist flood. No one familiar with the writings of the great Indian missionary we lost a few years ago, Dr. C. F. Andrews, who found Gandhi "a saint" and Rabindranath Tagore a teacher of the great moral ideas to the whole world, will see impossibility or impropriety in such joint effort. Kipling wrote

East is East and West is West
And never the twain shall meet.

True, if one has in mind a meeting for a bargain about territory

¹ S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*.

² C. Sarolea, *The Anglo-German Problem*.

and trade, about political status, about the objects of competitive material ambition. On these matters the inheritance of custom and feeling is so different, and the differences are accentuated rather than relieved by discussion, *unless and until you touch those springs of human nature at its best which supply the source of all religion.* But when you touch these, in sincere men of all varieties, you find an amazing identity of response, the ultimate root of every Faith being also the root of every other—though as far apart in outer manifestation as the ornate ritual of Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, Orthodox Greek on the one side and, on the other, the worship that Shelley had in mind—

A roofless temple, like the fane
Where, ere new Creeds could faith obtain,
Man's early race once knelt beneath
The overhanging deity.³

A "Bible of Humanity" has been suggested, which—unlike the "Sacred Books" of any single Faith, would have no tinge of local color, no basis in the peculiarities of race history, no suggestion that some particular people had altogether monopolized the divine favor and become sole custodian of what the Most High would make known to mankind. I cannot feel that this would be practicable, or more beneficial even if it could be achieved than any of the various enterprises of organic Church Union in Christendom among groups whose differences cannot be submerged without loss either of sincerity or of force. But short of this there might well be a mutual understanding, a cooperative effort for the ideals which matter alike to all, where the Christian leader would remember—with that great old Scottish theologian, A. B. Bruce, rejoicing in the Sun of Righteousness as supreme Light of the World—that "He made the stars also."

One clear inference to be drawn from the repeated disappointment of "Conferences" is that the harmony of mankind—or even a tolerable degree of mutual considerateness—if it is to be achieved at all, will come through the association of people on interests other than those of finance or politics, territory or trade. As James Martineau said, it "lies in profounder strata of our nature than any tillage of the mere intellect can reach."⁴ That wonderful Hindu mystic, Rabindranath Tagore, ventured on this subject one of his most arresting comparisons, when he

³ Shelley, *Rosalind and Helen*.

⁴ Martineau, *Studies of Christianity*, p. 412.

likened the West, seeking in international diplomacy a safeguard for the peaceful competitions of national greed to a glutton who refuses to change his habits but hopes to stop by a drug his nightmares of indigestion.⁵ If it is a mere coincidence, it is at least most suggestive that historically all the great religions began in the East. Lawyers, economists, business managers, architects of "the nation" are characteristic of the West, and the persisting western assumption has been that their type of talent is what the world needs to repair its broken fabric. The East, never strong in such talent, has always suspected that its exercise would divide rather than unite, and in its great religious systems has shown how it is on very different human concerns that Deep calleth unto Deep. Not least important, or least surprising, among the results of such *rapprochement* as I have suggested between religious leaders of the West and those of the East might well be this—that the branches of discordant Christendom itself would be made at length conscious of their common root as they felt the juice and sap of a wider vegetation in which they share.

After the First World War, there was an attempt at a League of Nations: it was shattered, in trial, by competing national interests which it sought in vain to integrate through proportional gratification. Whether the United Nations will fare any better, with a similar habit of treating economics as the reality of which other concerns are but the appearance, it requires so far no "morbid pessimist" to doubt. The ironic suggestiveness of the name "Lake Success" for the place of meeting has been illustrated many times. Could not something be achieved, at least to help, by a cooperation of religions, definitely recognizing and welcoming one another as such, with no shamefaced effort to explain away their purpose in terms of some contrivance of "humanist" advantage?

If they could thus be brought together, it would be found that Religion, far from being worn out, remains still a tremendous dynamic for human affairs. In China, in India, in mediaeval Europe, it served in days long gone by as the great constructive force in a social chaos. For our still worse chaos it will serve again, if we know how to use it. The real exhaustion we have watched is the exhaustion of other forces by which this one—historically the greatest of all, by far—was for a time displaced. It lost its strength because the source of that strength became misconceived. In its rejuvenescence, with so many of

⁵ Tagore, *Nationalism*, p.104. Contrast the apparent hope of Mr. Nehru that Hindus and Moslems, in their respective Indian States may be reconciled by being alike "modernized" into Secularism!

its competitors decrepit around it, lies our real hope for the future. We are facing an emergency now, wider and deeper than any the world has known before. The method, repeatedly successful on the narrower scale, is the one method for the broader. In the words of a Hebrew seer, which so many Faiths construing in different terms may adopt alike, the Lord's arm is not shortened that it cannot save.