

THE OUTLOOK FOR RELIGION

BY CURTIS W. REESE

A CURSORY survey shows religion in a rather bad plight. Even a thorough searching leaves an advocate of religion somewhat puzzled as to its future. Obviously this is a testing time for things ecclesiastical. Always there have been periodically crises in religion. Prophets have frequently dug new channels for the streams of faith, and reformers have often wrecked temples from sill to pinnacle. But the revolutionary process today seems to be vastly more determined than heretofore; and what is more significant, it is more thoroughgoing and intelligent.

I

One who wants to know how religion fares today need not look far from home. Everywhere are the evidences of lost power and prestige. Especially is this the case with the church and other organized expressions of religion.

How is the church viewed by the ordinary man? While the ordinary man is not an authority on theological matters, it is still true that the church cannot fare very well without him. His opinion, therefore, should be sought and valued. Now the ordinary man simply does not take the church seriously, nor does he take religion as he understands it seriously. There are, of course, notable exceptions, but this is the rule. The ordinary man really believes in "human kindness large among the sons of men", and he has the feeling that the order of things cosmic to some extent sustains such values. But he finds the church inactive or hostile to his specific aspirations for a larger life. He finds the church more active in devising prohibitions than in promoting life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Consequently, while a certain strain of mysticism

may cause him to retain nominal relations with the church, his heart is not there.

It is likewise with authors of note. Where is the modern literature of commanding importance that glorifies the institutions of religion? In vain does one search the volumes of Hardy, Shaw, Wells, Hergesheimer, Drieser, and Lewis for evidence of confidence in the influence of organized religion. A frontal attack like Elmer Gantry follows a period of silent contempt as in *Main Street*.

The primary assumption of the enormous number of magazine articles dealing with religion is that the church and its allied institutions are not functioning adequately, that the ointment is verily infested with pestiferous insects. The attitude of the press is distinctly not favorable to the church.

But what is still more serious, competent, honest and devoted students of life, servants of humanity, frankly regard the church as a social problem. Witness Bertrand Russell. In London he delivers an address telling why he is not a Christian, and incidentally challenging the foundations of the old religions. Page the whole world of humanitarian leaders, and only a small percentage will be found actively interested in organized religion.

And of still more significance, the whole lot of scientists and philosophers are little more than patronizing when not actually hostile.

II

The causes of these gloomy phases of the present religious situation have been searched for by many persons both inside and outside the church and are fairly well understood.

1. The first and perhaps the greatest cause of the lack of vital interest in organized religion is the other-worldly emphasis which prevailed for so long. This world was a period of probation only. It was not to be considered home. It was a vale of tears. Real interest was centered on heaven and things to come. Poverty and disease were borne as temporary inconveniences. The day of compensation was ahead. In its neurotic phases this other-worldly emphasis sold all that it had and gave the poor or made no plans beyond the expected day of deliverance. Songs, prayer, sermons, books neglected the affairs of this world and emphasized other-world relations. One of the most famous of all sermons was entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

The reverse swing of the pendulum was bound to come, and as is

usual it went too far in the other direction. The church became all-too-worldly in many respects; that is to say it took over cheap and tawdry methods of the world. In some instances the church became "gas stations" on the way to heaven. Instead of adapting divine things to human needs the church adapted things all-too-human to divine needs. The resulting impression was not that the world needs religion but that religion needs the world. Cheap sensations and lowered ideals will never bring religion back into power and influence. Religion must forswear the shallow and ephemeral and get a grasp on great issues of commanding importance in world affairs. Let there be no mistake on this point. Lowered standards do not bring success. Great causes make great men and great movements. It is now common-place to say that preaching is not what it once was. Without conceding too much we may grant that one cause of the decline of religious influence is the prevalence of mediocre preaching, and this in turn is due in part to the neglect of great issues.

In a period when industry has produced its greatest leaders, the church has been strikingly lacking in great leaders. Creative imagination in ecclesiastical affairs was never less in evidence than now.

All in all religion, especially in its organized expression, needs much searching of heart and mind—especially the latter.

In spite of these gloomy shadows on the surface, underneath mighty changes are taking place, and in my judgment religion is in a fair way to out distance its past record for good in human affairs.

1. Perhaps the most significant thing today is the redefinition of religion and the expansion of religious conceptions. The understanding of religion as the binding of man to a supernatural being is changing to the understanding of religion as the binding of man to those causes and ideals that have significance for his kind in personal and social quests. Whatever may prove to be the cosmic situation, there are gropings to be satisfied, there are loves to be fostered, there are friendships to be cultivated, there are physical and mental needs to be satisfied; and more and more we find the need for increased intelligence and more accurate technique in meeting these needs. Religion is man's effort to defeat whatever foes there are and to achieve whatever goals may be.

2. Along with this redefinition of religion is a corresponding expansion of religious concepts that bids fair to throw religion actively into every phase of human life. While these expanded conceptions

are commonplace in liberal circles, it is nevertheless profitable that we should from time to time focus attention upon them.

(1) The idea of the spiritual is coming to include the whole of life's aspirations, strivings, and achievements. Happily the whole dualistic arrangement is passing, we had God and the devil, heaven and hell, sacred and secular, spiritual and carnal; and these divisions were largely arbitrary and not moral in nature. But the old warfare between the sacred and the secular is drawing to a close. We are coming to see that the divine was never more sacred than when engaged in secular pursuits. The fireside and the more seemly aspect of home, the anvil and the less romantic tools of toil, the plow and the laboratory, the school and the press, the state, the nation, and the world, are all altars and crosses and incense and holies of holies when made so by noble purposes. Ecclesiastical practices and paraphernalia are never holy unless made so by the service of worthy ends.

Let it be understood that this change definitely is in the direction of more not less spirituality. There are those who cannot enjoy themselves in pleasant past-times without feeling God-forsaken. Also there are those who give no thought to the divine in ordinary diversion. Of the two groups the latter is to be preferred; but better still is the mind that consciously finds spiritual values throughout the whole of life, and this type of mind is increasing.

The most ardent anti-religious man cannot possibly object to spirituality when it comes to stand for the very values that he himself holds. The world will be spiritualized not by veiling the spiritual in mysteries and wonders, but by giving a divine glow to the pleasures and the tasks of ordinary life. Everything is holy that is consecrated to human well-being.

(2) Closely related to the expansion of the idea of the spiritual is the expansion of the attitude of reverence to include within its scope all that is humanly worthwhile. Skeptics have rightfully resented the seeming limitations of the reverent attitude to deity, and holy places and the like. But religion now specifically holds that there can be no true reverence for deific realms if there is none for human realms, that the essential processes of life are all to be revered, that all useful places should be viewed with wholesome reverence.

The old type of worship, confined largely to the Sunday hour in church, is discounted save when it eventuates in worshipful living

throughout the week. The formal reverence of the liturgies is giving way to the vital reverence of work and contemplation.

In fact the idea of reverence as an attitude is being overhauled. Reverence is growing into active creative anticipation. That is to say, reverence for childhood becomes the service of children. Reverence for beauty becomes the service of the beautiful. Reverence for truth becomes loyalty to true things. Passive worship is valid only when resulting in positive activity.

(3) The idea of salvation is coming to include society as well as individuals. Buddha left his wife and children in pursuit of personal salvation. Jesus refrained from assuming the responsibilities of a household. Ascetics innumerable have left society to find God in various places of seclusion. Fundamentalists still urge that religion has little or no social responsibility, that in his own good time and in his own way God will take care of the world.

But most of the great churches now have active departments of Social Relations. Many of the prominent leaders of the great denominations believe strongly in the need for social redemption. Consider the prophetic work of Walter Rauschenbusch, Francis Peabody, Harry Ward, George A. Coe, and others.

Well may evil doers insist that the church has no business in civic affairs, for when an enlightened church once goes in for civic righteousness then will evil doers have met their first real organized opposition.

(a) The world needs material salvation. Bread, clothing, shelter and cultural interests are fundamental in civilized life; and any social arrangement that increases the difficulty with which these values are attained is an ally of savagery. You cannot build civilization if hunger and nakedness and exposure to the cold blasts of winter constantly haunt the populace. It is a part of the business of religion to see that goods are honestly made, abundantly supplied, and economically distributed.

At a gas station I had presented a small bill in payment for oil when a little negro boy standing by opened his eyes in painful wonder and said, "My ain't some people rich." The eyes wandered off as if attending to nothing in particular and he added in an undertone as a sort of after thought, "Some people don't never be rich." I am prepared to say that it is the business of religion to make it impossible for the wail of poverty to ascend from the soul of a single child.

(b) The world needs political salvation. It would not be seemly for me to go beyond Chicago in pursuit of examples of political corruption, although no doubt such a pursuit would meet with success. There is ample political unrighteousness in Chicago to satisfy the most voracious reformer. Graft, murder, arson, bombing are frequent. Places of official responsibility seem to be subject to the influence of ordinary thugs and gunmen. The school system is victimized. And local policies are based on personal antipathies to King George. What could be more religious than a program of civic well-being in Chicago or in any other complex community?

There are international issues pressing for settlement. Debts, land laws, boundary lines, the wrongs done enslaved peoples are threatening to embroil the nations. The international situation needs religious attention and religious leaders are turning themselves in that direction, as evidenced by the extensive preparations now being made for a universal religious Peace Conference to be held in 1930. What could be more religious than the promotion of pacific and intelligent and just international relations?

(4) The idea of the natural is coming to include all the operations of life or being, here or beyond, here, now or beyond now. It was impossible to get very far with a satisfactory world view so long as the natural and supernatural were constantly clashing. A natural situation was likely to be bombed at any time by a supernatural explosive. Miracles were final proofs of the validity of the gospels. But miracles, together with the whole idea of the supernatural are passing into the limbo of magic and allied ideology. Religion is coming to be understood as the most natural thing in world. Whatever else religion may be it is the natural functioning of a normal person in the effort to achieve a full and free and socially useful life in ordinary circumstances. Growth in spiritual stature is as normal as growth in physical stature; in fact physical well-being and all things that go into its makeup are religiously valid.

Now obviously, religion as it is understood by liberals and as it is rapidly coming to be understood by others, is destined to wield an even greater force in human affairs. Like art, religion may free itself from institutions; like science, it may consciously plan its re-making; like philosophy, it may devote time to speculative interests; like governments it may try new social relationships. And in and through these phases of life and many others religion will grow greater through the years.

So life is coming to be viewed as a high venture in religion and religion as a large venture in life. Some lack faith in life and fall by the way; others depend upon ecclesiastical trapping and are mere camp followers of the elect; but happily there is an increasing host of those who march out under the wide open with banners of liberty and fraternity flung to the breeze, and to these religion is the supreme adventure.

It might even be that John on the Isle of Patmos was more prophetic than some have supposed when upon visioning the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, he said, "There was no temple therein." While I personally love the beauty of a temple and believe in organization as an essential form of life, I would not forget that religion is essentially free from the fortunes of temples and altars and crosses and holy places. Wherever is found nobility of aspiration or achievement, there is religion pure and undefiled.