

HUMANIST TRENDS IN MODERN RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

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THE study of trends has come to be regarded as a matter of major importance in the understanding of life processes. Not that there is any less interest in what has been nor in what now is. In fact the past and the present are especially significant in what they indicate to be the direction things are moving. There has perhaps never been a time when more was being done than now to find out what has really happened in the ages past. All the fields of knowledge are being re-investigated by scientific minds equipped with scientific method, technique, and apparatus. Out of the new knowledge thus made available is coming a tentative understanding of how the present has grown out of the past and what historical and current processes indicate for the future.

It would be difficult to overrate the importance of understanding trends. Many persons have wasted their lives, many movements have dissipated their energies in trying to keep alive ideas and programs which the trends of history have relegated to the realm of the "dodo." Lost causes as such may appeal to sacrificial heroism, but hardly to critical intelligence.

Not that we should summarily surrender to undesirable trends, but rather that we should seek to control trends in the direction of desired goals. The limits of control, however, are determined by the facts that give significance to the trends.

When the persons most competent in the several fields of learning begin to modify or rationalize or abandon the things most commonly believed in their fields, we are then in the presence of a condition that obviously calls for study. If these persons, however they may differ among themselves in details, move in a given direction, then a trend is established. Some people will refuse to follow.

Others will grudgingly move a few paces. Still others will pass through three stages; first, they will be in bitter opposition; second, they will say there is nothing new about the trend; and third, they will say that they have always believed in accordance with the trend. But the more courageous and far-seeing will from the very beginning move steadily and surely in the direction of the trend insofar as it appears in harmony with facts and ethical idealism.

Now in basic religious matters the usual dogmatic way of dealing with trends has been not merely to fail to understand them, not merely to ignore them, but to deny positively the very possibility of their existence. The faith "once for all delivered" has admitted of no change. But in spite of this hostile ecclesiastical atmosphere the spirit of man has refused to be subdued. The winds move in the tree tops. Indeed the very roots of the trees are being torn from their bedding in the rock and the soil.

Insofar as we are friends of what religion ought to be we will give heed both to research when it tells us what religion has been, and to prophecy when on a factual basis it tells us what religion may become.

It is my thesis that in modern religious developments there are unmistakable trends that move from *theo-centric* to *anthropo-centric religion*. Let us see how this holds in regard to various aspects of modern religious developments.

Significant trends are noted (1) in the study of religious sources, (2) in the appraisal of the dramatic religious leaders of history, (3) in the evaluation of doctrines, and (4) in the understanding of the nature of religion itself.

I

Sources

(1) In the study of religious sources we think first of all of the sacred literature of the world religions. In past ages, before the advent of the critical scientific study of documents, religious literature had a way of getting itself approved as peculiarly authoritative. This authority derived from the supernatural origin of the literature, or from the unique place held by its human author. Usually the human author merely mediated the message. When few people could read and write, and when still fewer could understand what was written, it was comparatively easy for writings to

gain credence as the very word of God, or at least, as the Modernist would say, the *norm* of religious experience.

So the Vedas and other sacred writings held sway in India; the Zendavesta, in Persia; the Tripitaka, in Buddhist lands; the Classics, in China; the Old Testament in Orthodox Judaism; the whole Bible, in Orthodox Christianity; the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price, in Mormonism; Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, in Christian Science.

But in recent times critical students have successfully challenged not only the verbal inspiration of sacred books but also the very idea of authoritative books as *norms* of valid modern religious experience. Back in the fifties, four young men were sent by the Brahma Samaj, a liberal Hindu movement, to study the four vedas at Benares and report to the mother Samaj in Calcutta. The result was the abandonment by this influential Hindu body of the doctrine of vedic inerrancy. It was fitting that this example should have been set by the Brahma Samaj, for it was the founder of that movement, Rammohun Roy, who was the father of that most helpful addition to the theological curriculum called Comparative Religion. In Christianity the smoke of the battle over higher criticism still lingers on the far horizon; but for the most part the Fundamentalists have been put to flight. Well known are the exposures of the real origin of the Book of Mormon and of Science and Health. In the various great religions critical heretics have blazed away at the scriptures, with varying results; but with the general effect that now the educated leaders of all religions look with a mingled expression of pain and patronage upon their fellows who still appeal to the authority of sacred volumes.

With the passing of the unique origin of the sacred scriptures, their unique nature ceased to have unique authority. In other words, the trend is definitely away from regarding any ancient writing as the norm for modern religious life. The effect of this is not to rob the people of religious literature, but to increase the literary material available for religious purposes. All literature, ancient and modern, that is profitable for spiritual purposes is the sacred literature of humanized religion; and the burden is upon us to produce today literature that can equal and surpass that of yesterday.

(2) It is likewise with the institutions of religion; that is, religion in its organized form. In spite of the teaching of many great religious leaders to the contrary, their followers have gen-

erally regarded organizations, institutions, and places as religious sources. At times it has been a certain line of succession, at times a particular mountain top, at times a temple or a cathedral or a shrine. These and other visible and invisible evidences that peculiar sources of religious life were possessed have resulted in streams of pilgrims to these sacred sources from the most ancient times down to the most recent occurrence in Malden, Massachusetts. It has taken a long time for even a portion of the race to learn that the spirit of religion is not bound, that all worthwhile organizations and institutions and places are holy. But the present day trend is definitely in the direction of regarding all inspirational movements and places, all experience of art and skill and wonder as sources of religious inspiration. While this may finally have a sad effect upon the institutions of organized religion, it will nevertheless have a wholesome effect upon the life of mankind. The religious institutions that would survive must do so in open competition with all other human institutions. This again gives us not fewer but more sources of religious inspiration.

(3) With the passing of scripture and institutions as final authoritative religious sources, the Modernist type of mind fell in with the traditional mystical way and declared *experience* to be the authoritative religious source. Now this had a scientific sound. It made a universal appeal. It gave great promise. But the appeal to experience is already going the way of former religious sources. In its place will come, is now coming *experimental experience*,³ that is, scientific method applied to the spiritual experience of man. Uncontrolled and uncriticised experience was no safer guide than the older authorities. Experiences were varied, multiple, and belonged to their setting. It is only by controlled experience, under conditions of testing, that we have good hope of using it as a dependable source. This has been pointed out by various persons these last years. Prof. Wieman of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in an article in the *Christian Century* gave solemn warning against appealing to uncontrolled experience as authority in religious matters.

Tests are being made to find out how experience is influenced, what it means, and how it may be improved ethically; as, for example, in the character tests under the auspices of professors in Teachers' College, Columbia. Their volume on *Studies in Deceit*

is illustrative of what I mean. The work of Professor Starbuck and his associates in Iowa State University is in a similar vein.

The sum of the matter is that the study of religious sources tends definitely away from the superhuman and authoritative to the human and experimental.

II

Leaders

(1) How is it in the appraisal of the dramatic religious leaders of history? Most of the religions have been builded around the real or supposed teaching and personality of real or mythical founders. Hinduism and Shintoism are possible exceptions. The names of Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Comte, and Mary Baker Eddy are associated with the origin and history of the religions with which their names are so intimately connected.

(2) To a considerable extent the same is true of the sects. Even John the Baptist is claimed by the sect that bears his name. The name of John Calvin is linked with Presbyterianism, John Wesley with Methodism, Alexander Campbell with the Disciples, William Ellery Channing with the Unitarians, and so on. Most of the religions and sects are the lengthened shadows of dominant personalities. Great men have wrought mightily in behalf of their ideas of righteousness. They have not always been original creators but they have embodied and dramatized the emotions and ideas of the inarticulate multitudes. Some of them have even made valuable contributions to religious life.

((3) The great-man-complex once held sway throughout all social life. The shadows of the Napoleons have fallen across the face of the earth. But nothing is surer today than the fact that social theory and the democratic spirit tend to discount, even to retire, the dramatic and ofttimes irresponsible leader, and to magnify the cumulative notions of many people and the possibility of expressing the public will. Cooperative plans of social life are urged not only as wise but as unavoidable ways of life. Our very souls are socially created. The shared life is as inevitable as it is profitable.

Current theory and practice move away from the dominant personality. Many of the outstanding war-time leaders of the nations have been retired by the suffrage of their fellow citizens; and the

feelings and ideas and hopes of the peoples of the world are beginning to be heard in the councils of the nations.

(4) Nowhere is this trend away from the domination of dramatic religious leaders more forcibly set forth than in the changing attitude towards Jesus of Nazareth. Only a little while ago the Christian world regarded Jesus as nothing less than very God of very God. Then the Unitarians made him something less than very God, but more than merely man. The next generation of Unitarians made him very man of very man. Then the Modernists followed suit with a view of Jesus as man, but what a man! He was used as a depository of all modern idealism. Others, however, challenged the doctrine of the adequacy of his moral and spiritual leadership. They pointed out that he said nothing against slavery although slavery was general in his day; that he said nothing against war although war was the chief honoric profession of his day. To the argument that his general teaching implied opposition to slavery and war they replied that the highest ethical leadership is not in abstract principles nor in pious professions, but in the concrete and the specific. Meaningful words must be tipped with steel and accurately aimed.

And not regarding these changes in attitude as enough came a whole bevy of critics saying that in point of fact Jesus never lived at all, that the whole Jesus fabric is mythical. Drews in Germany, Robertson in England, Smith in America startled the Christian world with slightly different theories of the non-historicity of Jesus. Various men including Professor Shirley Jackson Case of the University of Chicago replied. But the late George B. Foster after examining the literature for and against the historicity of Jesus could only say, "Jesus is historically probable but not religiously necessary." As the battle progressed other works were written by Couchond of France, Brandes of Denmark, and Chowdhuri of India against the historicity of Jesus, and many more in behalf of his historicity or upon the assumption of it. But today it seems to me necessary to go even further than the statement by Dr. Foster, and say, Jesus is historically doubtful and not religiously helpful.

(5) In my judgment, one of the greatest services that can be rendered to religion is to free it from the grip of the historic ethnic religious leaders. Thousands of modern minded souls in the midst of the new scientific spirit and method are more competent in the

spiritual realm than were the fathers of the world religions and of the sects of Christendom.

The trend is away from one-man-religion and in the direction of a social quest to find satisfactory values for all mankind.

3

Doctrines

(1) The trend of modern religious thought in the evaluation of doctrines is also in the humanist direction; that is, away from the dogmatic and in the direction of the experimental. It is perhaps here that we find the greatest difference between the older and the newer mind in religious matters. The older mind thinks of religion as consisting largely of a set of doctrines, and of doctrines as rather definitely fixed. The newer mind thinks of religion as consisting largely of experimental quests, and of the conclusions of the quest as tentative, and, like prices, subject to change without notice.

The older mind did not hold doctrines as hypotheses but as certainties. He was concerned with finalities. He felt the need of anchoring to some rock of ages. To doubt was to be damned. But the newer mind thinks of nothing so little as of certainty. In fact he rather doubts whether any certainty exists. He feels the thrill of novelty. For him it is postulates and hypotheses, not dogmas and certainties.

(2) The more modern minded of even the conservative clergy regard such basic doctrines as God, soul, and immortality as hypotheses. They defend these hypotheses on much the same ground as the scientists do theirs, namely, as working theories to be judged by their results. Now it is a far cry from this modern attitude to the old order in religion when a Jonathan Edwards spoke with absolute certainty of the will of the Calvinistic God to the immortal souls that hung on his words. There was a dramatic situation. Heaven and Hell were as real as Northampton. Immortal souls hung in the balance. The responsibility of the preacher was beyond description. This situation accounted in large part for the great preaching of those days. It was likewise in the Hebrew tradition when prophets spoke the will of the eternal. But today it is difficult to get oratorical, much less eloquent over the tentative hypotheses that must constitute the metaphysical message of the modern preacher.

(3) But in the social realm it is different. What of a warless world? What of industry operated for the good of all? What of free peoples working out their own destiny? What of a new generation reared in the possession of the cultures of all time, and possessing the fruits of the arts today in all their richness and beauty? What of minds freed of the fears that haunt them—fear of the past that presses upon them, fear of the overarching unknown, fear of the plagues that waste the body and the mind, fear of fear itself? These are causes that will give dramatic content to effective preaching in a humanized world.

The trend is away from doctrines considered as authoritative pronouncements about the eternal, and in the direction of doctrine considered as the orderly arrangement of convictions about everyday life.

4

Religion

(1) Thus may be seen the necessity for a re-statement of the nature of religion itself. Here again the trend is away from religion understood as man's response to "the determiner of destiny," to use Professor Pratt's terms, or even as man's response to super-human sources of fortune; away from religion understood as "man's conduct facing Godward," as I was taught in my theological school days; away from the fascinating and poetic theory that religion is "the life of God in the soul of man"; away also from the notion that religion is necessarily tied up with any theistic interpretation of cosmic existence.

Rather is the trend in the way of regarding religion as a human effort to find satisfactory modes of living, in the course of which many personal, social, planetary, and cosmological theories may be postulated, tested, and abandoned; the abiding thing being the urge to newer and newer efforts to reach ever-receding goals.

It is the testimony of Professor A. Eustace Haydon of the Department of Comparative Religion in the University of Chicago that today in practically all religions there are increasing numbers who interpret religion as the shared quest for a satisfying life.

(2) The very vernacular use of the term *religion* is tending to hasten the identification of religion with the questing process. When a man commits himself to a great *cause* we say that *cause* becomes his religion. We speak of men who make their art or their business

or their social theory, their religion. Communism is said to be the religion of young Russia, as indeed it is.

Not long ago I attended an experience meeting in an orthodox Christian church where some ten or a dozen men testified. Every man of them told of his religious experience in terms of ceasing to do this and beginning to do that. Unconsciously they revealed the real nature of their religion. It was a human doing and not doing. The only trouble was that they were concerned with doing and not doing inconsequential things, such as card playing. But they identified religious experience with human behavior in a human setting.

A few years ago I had occasion to argue a matter before a commission studying a certain problem relating to theological education, of which commission the late Charles W. Eliot was a member. In the course of the discussion one of the commission, himself an overseer of Harvard, remarked that he was not interested in a type of theological education that turned out what he called "social secretaries." Whereupon, Dr. Eliot, in his characteristically direct way said, "My dear sir, if I am not badly mistaken, within the next twenty-five or thirty years our idea of the very nature of religion will undergo a great change." That change is taking place even more rapidly than President Eliot predicted. Today great religious organizations are committing themselves to concrete quests. One of the most effective examples of this is the work of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. Practically all of the great religious movements, including Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, have within the last ten years issued far-reaching programs of social reconstruction.

(3) It is not likely that religion will cease to concern itself with the effort to understand man's cosmic setting, nor should it abandon such effort. It is natural that man should forever attempt to push back the veil of mystery that hangs so tantalizingly about him. Modern minds are well aware how painfully inadequate is our total knowledge; but they feel that the little knowledge man does possess is his instrument and his hope of further conquests of the dark. In controlling life situations a little factual knowledge is worth worlds of mystery.

Religion as thus understood is developing new ideals and techniques for accomplishing its purpose. Fact finding becomes more significant than wishful petition. What man really wants becomes

of more concern than what it has been said that he should want. Aesthetic expression is regarded as superior to monastic repression. Scientific apparatus ranks higher than sacred images. The free play of free minds replaces the submissive will. The buoyant thrill of physical and mental well-being are of first importance in spiritual well-being. Modern religion says to mankind, trust your capacity to understand increasingly the universe in which you live; trust your ability to order your way increasingly in harmony with the possibilities that inhere in the nature of man and the world; and so trusting, act accordingly.

In summary, the trend in modern religious developments is away from the transcendent, the authoritative, the dogmatic, and toward the human, the experimental, the tentative; away from the abnormal, the formal, the ritualistic; and toward the normal, the informal, the usual; away from the extraordinary mystic expression, the exalted mood, the otherworldly; and toward the ethical, the social and the worldly; away from religion conceived as one of man's concerns, and toward religion conceived as man's one concern.