BACK · TO RELIGION

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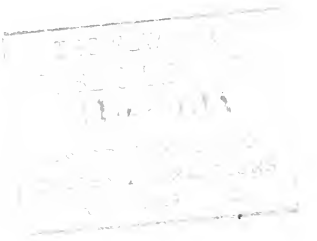

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HE is but a superficial observer of the times who can think that the movement of life today is altogether against religion, and that only the denial of religion has the spirit of the age with it.

For, certain as it is that blatant denial still holds the public ear and is more and more permeating the masses, yet in the work of the intellect, and likewise in the depths of men's souls, the case is different. Here, with ever greater vigor, is springing up the feeling that religion is indispensable, the yearning for religion. What is understood by religion is often anything but clear, and often very different from the traditional forms of religion; but the demand is unmistakable for more depth of life and for the establish-

ment of profounder inner connections than our visible existence affords. In the spiritual life of the present day, molecular transformations are taking place, inconspicuous at first but constantly increasing, which will eventually burst upon our view, and which will necessarily provoke essential changes in the entire condition of life. Today this movement is still an undercurrent, and on the surface the tide flows in the opposite direction. But more and more the undercurrent is rising to the surface, and unless every indication fails, it will soon come into control.

The most fundamental reason for this tendency may be indicated by a single sentence. It is caused by the increasing dissatisfaction with modern civilization, or at least with those aspects of civilization which now occupy the surface of life. All the splendor of the external successes of civilization cannot hide the fact that it does not satisfy the whole man with his inner needs, and that

the amelioration of the world around us which it has accomplished does not compensate for the inner emptiness of its excessive concentration of effort on the visible world, its secularization of life.

We moderns have set ourselves at work with all our might, have acquired technical perfection, have combined isolated achievements into great systems. By the increased efficiency of our labor we have increasingly subdued the world, and at the same time have imposed upon human society a far more rational form. But, while we have given every care and effort to the means and conditions of life, we have exposed ourselves to the risk of losing life itself, and while performing astounding external feats, inwardly we have become smaller and smaller. Our work has separated itself from our souls, and it now reacts overmasteringly upon them, threatening to absorb them utterly. Our own creations have become our mas-

ters and oppressors. Moreover, as the division of labor increases, work constantly becomes more specialized and engages an ever smaller part of each individual soul; the whole man comes less and less to activity, and we lose any superior unity of our nature. Thus more and more we become mere parts of a civilization-machine.

The dangers thus arising were not felt to be so serious a menace, so long as religion and a culture controlled by ideals kept before men's minds another conception of life. But now that these are weakened and repressed, this trend toward the visible world meets less and less resistance. Yet it is true that as a result of the same process the accompanying loss is at least clearly seen and keenly felt. The victory itself is thus calling forth a countermovement, and the outer triumph, by letting us plainly discern the limits of human power, is being transformed into an inner defeat.

An independence once gained for the spiritual life can be temporarily obscured, but not permanently destroyed. At one and the same moment the craving that life should have more soul and depth is expressing itself with elemental power, and, on the other hand, it is becoming clear that, if the All is without soul and no new spiritual world stands open before us, we humans, too, can have no souls. The result is that we are again driven into the path of religion, since without religion life cannot find the longed-for depth.

This craving for soul is accompanied by a craving for continuance and eternity.

Modernity has abandoned religion's mode of conceiving life and the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, has left eternity colorless and empty, in its uncurbed desire to plunge full into the current of the time, to uplift conditions here, and from this world to derive all its forces. In all this a special importance has at-

tached to the idea of development. Instead of thinking their position to be fixed and unshakable by the appointment of a higher power, be it God or fate, men have come to think of our life as still in flux, and its condition as susceptible of measureless improvement; above all the immaturity and all the losses of the present has arisen the confident hope of a better and ever better future. Such a conviction has led men to devote endeavor entirely to the living present and carefully to adjust effort to the existing stage of evolution. That contributes great freshness and mobility to life; all rigidity is dispelled, all magnitudes become fluid, infinite increase multiplies the abundant forms.

Without in any wise attacking or disparaging all this, one's own experience of life yet makes it more and more clear that this trend has its dangers and limitations. To yield to the tendency of the times seemed at first to bring clear gain, for a

group of persistent convictions still maintained themselves and supplied to the movement a counterbalancing repose. More and more, however, the movement drew into itself these survivals; more and more exclusively it mastered all life. It constantly became more swift, more hurried, more agitated; the changes followed faster and faster, one moment crowded on another, and the present was reduced to a passing instant. But in this process it has become apparent that this passionate forward striving leaves no room for true life. And, further, all courage must needs perish, so soon as we are forced to the conviction that everything which we today revere as true, good, beautiful, is subject to change and may tomorrow become unstable, that what is today acclaimed "modern" may tomorrow be cast aside as obsolete. He who unreflectingly lives merely for the moment may in all seriousness look upon that moment as the acme of

the whole; but he who looks a little farther cannot doubt that it will be no better with us than with those who went before us, and that the saying still holds which according to Indian doctrines the spirits of the dead cry to the living: "We were what you are; you shall be what we are." In fine, if life is all strung on the thin thread of successive moments, each crowding back its predecessor, so that when the moment vanishes all action at once sinks again into the abyss of nothingness, then, in spite of all the exciting activity of the moment, life becomes a mere shadow.

If only we were quite sure that all our pains and care and haste were bringing about progress for the whole of human life! But that, again, we are not. True, we are constantly advancing in exact science, as we are in the technical mastery of our environment; we are compelling the elements into our service; we are freeing our existence

from pain and enriching it with pleasure. But are we by all that winning a closer connection with the depths of reality? Are we growing in spiritual power as in ethical sentiment? Are we becoming greater and nobler men? As life gains in pleasure, do our inner contentment and true happiness increase in due proportion? In truth, we are growing only in our relations to the world outside, not in the essence of our being; and hence the question is not to be evaded, whether the unspeakable toil of modern civilization is worth while. We work and work, and know not to what end; for in giving up eternity we have also lost every inner bond of the ages and all power of comprehensive view. Without a guiding star we drift on the waves of the time.

As soon as this becomes a fact of clear consciousness and individual experience, either all courage to live must collapse or we must again discover within our domain, and

resuscitate, something durable, something eternal, to give us support against the flight of the moments and to permit us to work for durable aims. Otherwise, our life has no sense and no value. That a longing for such an eternity, for a superiority to mere movement, pervades our time, is revealed by many signs. But such a craving leads, if not directly to religion, yet near to religion, as the chief representative of eternal truth.

Again, men crave more love and more solidarity in the human race than modern civilization affords, and that, too, is driving men to religion. Christianity not only had made love the kernel of religion, but also, starting from a Kingdom of God, it had established an inner human solidarity and created an organization on a spiritual foundation. For the modern age, however, so far as it went its own way, other aims came to the front. The chief thing came to be the individual, his emanci-

pation from all hindrances, the development of all his powers, their unlimited enhancement. In all departments of life the independent development of the individual is a chief trait of the modern world; each of the great civilized nations in its own way has contributed to it, according as each has found its high level in art and literature, in religion, or in political and social life. Now for a time this individualism did not come into collision with the old ideals, for the individual found the totality of a spiritual world present within him, so that each one in his proper station could make it his chief task to stamp his own peculiar form on this inner world and to render it his peculiar service. But the situation altered as soon as that world of the spirit faded and disappeared. With it vanished everything that inwardly united individuals and bound their souls together. One individual became inwardly indifferent to another,

and the way was opened for a man to make his highest aim his own personal advancement and utmost selfish gain, in total unconcern for any one else.

The same principles which govern individual conduct are extended to social groups and entire nations; self-interest is the single rule of action, the moral solidarity of mankind is relaxed and dissolved. The danger is imminent that the end may be a war of all against all (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). Undoubtedly the resulting rivalry and strife has effected much that is great; it has given life a thorough shaking up, and banished all idle repose. And on this new foundation cohesive forces are by no means lacking. Such a force in particular is Work, which with its growth to great combinations perfects organization, assigns to each single element a definite part, and binds them all firmly together. But such gearing together of performances by no means amounts

to harmony of sentiment; if it did, the antinomies of the social question and our economic conflicts would be impossible. In truth, combination in work does not prevent wide divergence of conviction and opinion, or even mutual hatred and strife. Sects and parties are increasing; common estimates and ideals keep slipping away from us; we understand one another less and less, and are falling deeper and deeper into a confused Babel of tongues. Even voluntary association, that form of human unity peculiar to modern times, the free union of many individuals, unites more in accomplishment than in disposition, brings men together outwardly rather than inwardly. Thus, among the monstrous confusions of the present time the demand for stable connections grows insistent, connections which shall take concern both for the common weal and for the individual. If, however, this demand plants itself wholly on the basis of the visible world and

denies everything invisible, it must inevitably assume the form of a harsh oppression and compulsion, for it can produce its effect not through conviction but solely through force. In the social-democratic movement of the present such a danger already shows itself in full distinctness. But while the modern man struggles with all his soul against such a compulsion, a solution of the entanglement is to be sought in no other direction than that of a recovery of inner human bonds and of recourse to an inner world, common to all, of convictions, faith, ideals. We need to upbuild humanity from within, and this cannot be done without a profound deepening of life, and this in turn is not possible without religion.

The fact that today, with the greatest abundance of external points of contact, we are internally getting farther and farther apart, necessarily leads to inner isolation. Amid the stupendous driving-gear

the individual sees himself left to his own resources and completely indifferent to everyone else. Such isolation is painful, yes, unbearable, especially for finer natures. All the fulness of human activity, highly as it is to be prized, cannot make good the lack of inner union and essential love. It affords no sufficient counterweight for the self-seclusion of man in his special circle of interests, for the preponderance of selfishness. Yet this selfishness, which separates all from all, turns out to be too narrow for the man himself; irresistibly a longing arises for a greater harmony of our spirits and for a value for each individual that shall transcend himself. But how could such a longing push its way to victory against the indifference of nature and the corrupt doings of men, unless a kingdom of love, a world of love, come to man and lend him a value? But that is exactly what religion represented, and what it brought to mankind.

Soul, eternity, love, — these are not brought to us quickly and painlessly by the world about us; they require an inner elevation, they demand a new world. And beyond these individual aspects doubts are also awakened and transformations made necessary by the totality of human nature. It was a main point of religion, especially of the Christian religion, not to accept and recognize man as experience presents him, but to require of him a complete transformation, an inner re-birth. The modern age has more confidence in man, it awakens in him the consciousness of strength more than of weakness, it summons him to the full development of all his slumbering powers. And in fact it has been shown that man is capable of far more than he used to be given credit for, that he can actively put his hand to the world, and successfully strive to realize the rational and rationalize the real. While, however, man in the past thought

highly of himself and bravely undertook high things, he formerly felt himself to be still living in the spiritual associations which he had inherited, as member of a Kingdom of God or as sharer in a world of reason; and this consciousness disciplined and enlarged his power. But these associations have gradually vanished; the tendency toward man has gradually passed into a rude opposition to any superhuman world, and constantly takes a more hostile attitude toward religion and toward any visible order. Characteristic of this is the well-known saying of Ludwig Feuerbach: "God was my first, reason my second, man my third and last thought." In contrast to such a conception of man, which limits him to himself alone, the saying of Hegel in his *Philosophy of History* has its truth: "The consequence of putting man into the highest place is that he holds himself in no esteem. For only with the consciousness that a higher being exists does man

attain a standpoint which allows him true esteem."

It cannot be denied that by giving up all connection with an invisible world and by complete limitation to visible existence man has been growing smaller. First of all, his place in the sum of reality has been reduced. He is now a mere bit of nature, and cannot claim a superior position and a peculiar work. In contrast to the enormously expanded space and time which nature has opened to modern research, the whole human circle is shrinking into tiny littleness. Rightly did William James emphasize the fact that for one hundred and fifty years progress seems to have meant nothing but a continual magnifying of the material world and a steady diminution of the importance of man.

And not only has the external position of man grown worse, he has also retrograded internally. When man is limited to sensuous existence, he loses all motive and all capacity

to raise substantially his spiritual level and to counteract with any vigor the petty, low, self-centred part of his own being. He has to accept what he finds in himself, and exclusively follow the impulses awakened in him by nature; all resistance to them necessarily seems folly. That was endurable while an optimistic point of view glorified man, and lent him greatness and dignity in his own eyes; it becomes intolerable as soon as a more candid consideration causes us to discern and recognize the limitations and defects of man, understood as a mere natural being. And it cannot be denied that the experiences of modern life have given decisive preponderance to this unfavorable estimate. Whereas the eighteenth century could not exert itself enough to exalt the dignity and greatness of man (*la grandeur de l'homme*), we of today, when we picture man to ourselves, are far more inclined to think of what is petty, low,

self-centred, the "all-too-human" (Nietzsche). And since we do not intend to yield without a struggle to this humiliation, we are developing a zealous endeavor to elevate man of himself, in his own sphere. Some hope to attain this by uniting individuals into great masses and considering those masses as the bearers of reason, in agreement with the doctrine set up by Aristotle of the accumulation of reason in the mass; such have a firm belief in the reason of the multitude. In exactly the opposite direction, others wish to exalt single eminent individuals as high as possible above the masses and to make them the centre of gravity of intellectual creation. Thus the former through aggregation, the latter through isolation, hope to be able to make more out of man. But, whatever relative justification these two tendencies may have, they do not reach the main goal. For by no readjustment within the human circle can great-

ness be given to man, if human nature is not capable of elevation from within, if man is a mere natural being. So we continue to press on to a mere human culture and civilization; we see through its inadequacy, and yet cannot emancipate ourselves from it or lift ourselves above it; we can neither discover new aims nor develop new powers other than those which it supplies. The fact, however, that, despite the vast amount of earnest work and the restless movement of today, we yet lack a satisfying aim for this work, an aim that ennobles and inspires the work itself, — that fact makes the present state of civilization absolutely intolerable. Man can bear much hindrance and hurt and not lose his courage; but he cannot endure to have his whole life aimless and meaningless. Just because our life is ever growing more intense and more laborious, we must unconditionally demand that it be given an aim and a meaning.

Therefore in all deeper souls today is stirring a demand for an inner uplift of human nature, for a new idealism. And this demand will necessarily have to seek an alliance with religion. No matter how many opponents religion may still encounter, nevertheless, stronger than all opponents, stronger even than all intellectual difficulties, is the necessity of the spiritual self-preservation of humanity and of man. Out of the very resistance to the menace of annihilation will proceed elemental forces, — which are the strongest thing in the world.

Thus, though it be through a course of hard fights and radical upheavals (as history indirectly tends to prove), religion will surely come to new ascendency. But the return to religion by no means signifies a return to the old forms of religion. Through modern culture too much in the condition of life has been changed for us to resume these forms unchanged. Religion will win back

men's souls so much the sooner, the more energetically it harks back to its original sources, the more sharply it separates the temporal and the eternal in their own spheres, and so brings the eternal to new effectiveness and sets it in close and fruitful relation to the real needs of the present. The superiority of the eternal consists not in that it persists unchanged within time, but in that it can enter all times without losing itself in them, and from them all can elicit that particular portion of truth which their endeavor holds. "The old that ages, he must let go, who would hold fast the old that ages not" (Runeberg).

The fundamental mood of mankind today is essentially the reverse of what it was at the beginning of the modern period. At that time the freshness of new vital power lent a rose-colored hue to all reality, and it was possible to hope that an immanent culture would bring about the complete satisfaction of all man's

spiritual needs. The experiences of the period have shown man his limitations; great complications have arisen, much unreason has become apparent in our circumstances, our ambition has encountered greater and greater obstacles. But the recognition of so much unreason in our world forces us to the following alternative: either we declare ourselves powerless against unreason, — then all the courage and strength of life must collapse and we succumb to pessimism; or, on the other hand, wrestling manfully, we gain a connection with an invisible world and the depths of reality, draw thence new power of life, and take up with new courage the fight against all unreason. That course will result in a well-founded and serious optimism, radically different from the superficial optimism of the market-place. The false optimism ignores complication and unreason, and hence inevitably loses all depth of life; the true optimism knows and

appreciates these, but is not warped and deterred by them. It possesses a resource superior to every hindrance, and from opposition only gains new might and courage. I should like to think that such a genuine and well-founded optimism corresponds to the intrinsic nature of the American people. But without Religion genuine optimism is impossible.

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