

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


TWO CHEERS FOR CHRISTIAN SECULARITY!

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Can you imagine the nervous tensions that would be touched off were Congress to decree that henceforth Americans were to stop on "Green" and go on "Red?" After all these years of doing it the other way! Pedestrians and motorists alike would buckle under the strain. Deeply grained habits and conditioned reflexes can be altered only at the cost of pain.

Something like this has been happening to the Christian church of late. Many laymen and not a few ministers are positively bewildered as they find the church apparently reversing itself on one front after another. Once a protector of society's values, the church today is bringing those values into question. Once a promoter of peace, the church is fast becoming an agent of agitation. Once interested in the souls of men, the church is now expressing concern for man's material well-being. Once warning its members to shun worldliness, the church is now commending worldliness as belonging to the Christian style of life.

We are living in the time of Christian secularity and as the King of Siam put it in the Broadway musical, "It is a puzzlement." As the title of the message suggests, however, there is much in what is going on today for which we should be grateful. Let's tranquilize our passions for a moment, lower the decibel count and try to have an objective look.

Man today is taking responsibility for his history. There was a time when man saw himself as a passive respondent to the forces of life. In the ancient view man considered himself to be a part of nature. Since nature is cyclical, man thought of his life as cyclical too. His years did not move forward on a line, they turned in the fashion of a wheel. He stood in awe of nature. Even when he sought to win his sustenance from the soil, he was careful to make peace with the powers that be through ritual and sacrifice.

In the medieval view of history, man was still essentially passive. True there was a plan now that was associated with the will of God. A hierarchy of values was thought to exist that reached its apex in Jesus Christ. But the medieval kingdom of metaphysical essences made no room for vital personal experience and decision. Man simply accepted his place in life as belonging to God's will. He did not think to challenge his station.

But today man has historicized everything in his life. He is not content to simply adapt himself to pre-established orders. All that he has inherited and all the options that stretch out before him are history to him. This is what we mean when we say man has "come of age." Life has been desacralized. Man is willing now to stand up to life and answer back. William Barrett puts it succinctly when he says, "Man does not have a fixed essence that is handed to him ready-made; rather, he makes his own nature out of his freedom and the historical conditions in which he is placed. As Ortega y Gasset puts it, 'man has no nature, only a history.'" 1

It is in the spirit of this insight that Carlyle Marney speaks thus to the church: "There is no point in our continued praying to the Almighty to save a world he has commissioned us to save. The strength is in our hands. The knowledge is in our minds. We lack only the will to be and to do, and for these we can pray." 2

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This is the exciting and pervasive fact of our time, that man today is taking responsibility for his history. Rather than view this development with suspicion, Christians should rejoice. For this coming of age, this awakened sense of history has its roots in the Hebrew-Christian tradition. Men like Friedrich Gogarten, Arend van Leeuwen, Hendrikus Berkhof and others have written convincingly to establish this connection.

For centuries the church gave primary emphasis to the personal character of the work of Christ in the hearts of men. Of late, however, New Testament scholars are increasingly calling our attention to the "cosmic value" of Christ. We are coming to see that for all too many years our Christ has been too small. We are beginning now to follow-up on some of those small shadowy hints given us by St. Paul.

Notice for example the sweep of these words from Colossians I:16-17, in the New English Bible. "In Him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities, and powers: The whole universe has been created through Him and for Him. And He exists before everything and all things are held together in Him."

In at least four of his epistles the Apostle Paul speaks in a somewhat veiled way about "the powers" of the universe. Hendrikus Berkhof has given us a very fine study of this term in a book called Christ And The Powers. It is his considered judgment that these powers over which Jesus Christ has triumphed are the structures and orders so vital to man's life, invisible forces that affect us all. These powers while necessary to man's life can become demonic and work against God's will for His creation. Keying on the victory that Jesus Christ achieved over dominions and thrones and powers the church is now eagerly setting about the task of getting men and women to enter into the freedom that Jesus Christ effected.

This is the point of D. T. Niles' observation when he says so well that "The world is original and ultimate, not the Church: in the beginning there is earth and a man, and at the end 'there was no temple therein.' The world isn't here to join the Church, that is an impossible anachronism. The Church is here to join the world. The world doesn't owe the Church a living; the Church owes the world its own true life as world." 3

What is happening at a breath-taking rate right before our eyes these days, is that the church is belatedly giving strenuous attention to humanizing life. We are beginning for the first time in the Christian era to take history seriously. We are viewing history as something more than a vale of soul-making. We are regarding it as something more than a mere back-drop before which our own personal experience of God takes place. We are starting at last to move out of our stained glass fox-holes. We are finally showing as much concern about the public course of history as we are the private course of our individual pilgrimages. We are at last ready to "break camp," to address ourselves to the very world that is the object of God's love. We are coming to see that the Good News in our time is best communicated when it becomes hard news. That is to say, the gospel in which we believe is most convincing when it gets off the "church page" and finds its way into the pages that report on man's on-going life.

Or, to come at it another way, it would be fair to say that the church now is beginning, perhaps for the first time, to practice the stewardship of power. We are coming to see that our reluctance to speak out in the past served to establish the rights and privileges of the "haves."

Perhaps it is an over-simplification to look at it this way, but there is a sense in which man is always involved in an all-out game of King of the Hill. You remember how the game goes. The strongest bulls and fights his way to the top and then prepares to defend his position against the renewed assaults of those whom he has beaten. In our country in particular, and in the western world in general, some who clutched and scrounged and elbowed and fought their way to the summit have sought to don the striped shirt of the referee and blow the whistle that would declare the game over and all positions frozen.

We are beginning to see that the church by its

insistence that men play the game "according to the rules" worked to secure and legitimize the holdings of the kings at the top. In the spirit of the day we are now questioning the rules in the interest of justice and fair play. The arrangements under which we live have a history. They are not above review or beyond revision.

This is the kind of worldliness that is pervading the church today, to the consternation of many. We are not interested in collecting Christians out of the world for the church. We are not concerned any longer to incarcerate the layman within the church. We want to share with our people an experience of worship and a knowledge of the faith, then "loose them and let them go" into the world where they belong.

It used to grieve me in one of my earlier parishes that a very distinguished judge who was a member of that church did not avail himself of the mid-week opportunities of the congregation. (We ministers, if not careful, tend to run little loyalty checks here, and this man had not come out too well.) But one day common sense broke on my poor mind and it occurred to me that it was enough that this man identified himself with the church at worship. I came to see that it was tantamount to a sin against the very world that God loves to try to draw him into the church away from his sphere of influence in the interest of a supper or some other mid-week activity.

During a Session meeting of a Presbyterian Church in the northwest recently an Elder arose to ask that he be excused. He was a member of the City Council and had to leave to vote on a matter that was vital to the public school system. The moderator, of course, granted his request. As the gentleman made his way to the door one of his fellow Elders said, "I hope that education bill passes." The man turned and said "I didn't know you cared." For the first time ever that Session began a discussion about an issue that had to do with something other than the immediate life of the church.

I contend that that Elder went from the Session meeting to the Council meeting without ever having left the church!

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"Two Cheers For Christian Secularity!" Two cheers but not three. Why do we withhold that vital third cheer that would make endorsement complete? For the simple reason that Christian secularity is not an un-mixed blessing. For one thing the source and center of man's freedom from the powers is more frequently assumed than proclaimed. It is not just a matter of jealousy on my part that prompts me to complain. I learned a long time ago that the world for centuries has been illumined by "indirect lighting." Revolutionary movements are not usually courteous. They seldom write "thank you" notes to the sources that fired up their cause.

My concern stems from the fact that unless we know the source of our liberation we will fall into the clutches of one autonomy or another. This is precisely the somber note that Berkhof sounds in his study. He writes, "Wherever the missionary endeavour has gone, the curious situation arises that a whole nation gratefully eats of the fruit, but only a minority desires the tree which produced the fruit." 4

And then, speaking about the hang-up that we have as westerners in trying to export our way of life to the so-called darkened areas of the world, Berkhof says, "Europe and America now flood these areas with all the products of a Christian and anti-Christian secularization. And these are grafted on what are still primarily naturalistic, tribal forms. But the tree, on which these fruits organically belong, is hardly transplanted at all. This means that the people who come in contact with the results of our culture are uprooted by it. The positive background, confrontation with the new Lord is lacking. The help offered by the West presupposes an appreciation for labour, history and nature, for which

there is hardly room, for instance, in the acosmic philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism." ⁴ If we would rightly know the freedom that St. Paul proclaims in that thrilling passage in Romans 8, need we not also know the agony of sin and the release of faith that he talks about in Romans 1-7? The gift without the giver is not only bare, it can be dangerous as well.

One is also concerned about secularity because those who take to themselves the task of reshaping history do not always recognize the need for norms and judgment other than their own. Already there is a fundamentalism of the new left. It is dangerous business trying to identify the will of God and pinpoint what He wants done. The best of our aims and methods need some upward reference.

This is what Dr. John Bennett had in mind when he addressed the graduating seniors at Princeton Seminary two years ago, and said, "There is much to be said for the celebration of the secular:...this emphasis upon (allowing) the creative human enterprises to be themselves, free from ecclesiastical or traditional religious controls.... I see, however, a tendency to celebrate the secular in such a way as to allow too much of what goes on under this name to remain without Christian criticism."

Moreover, in trying to rectify the imbalance of many years by emphasizing the social implications of the gospel over the personal the church is neglecting its mandate to share the good news with all people. These are hard days for every Department of Evangelism in the major denominations. The mood of the day seems to favor saving the world from the outside in. But is it not clear that there must be at least a nucleus of men and women in the world who are avowedly loyal to Jesus Christ and consciously intent upon being the leaven in the loaf?

Perhaps we are settling for changes in the systems because we are not radical enough to press for a change in man. It was no less a figure than Nicolas

Berdyayev, who said "When people tell me that a 'new order' is to be brought about and man is to be released by a change in the mechanism of society, I want to say to them: for God's sake refresh your memory! Your new order is as old as any other. There has never been a time when man was freed by society: he was always at its mercy, at its secular or religious mercy. So it was among the primitive tribes, so it has been ever since and, no doubt, so it will be until the end. A new 'order' will arise on the ashes of all orders and as a result of the only effective the personalistic revolution." 7

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For better or for worse we live in the midst of revolution. It is not our option to stop it, but it is our privilege to participate in it, to help shape and direct it. The question then is whether we are going to retreat into the church to enjoy the comfort of our fellowship and the strength of our creed, or whether we will venture out into the world to work in and for the very earth that Jesus came to save? This is the challenge that comes to us through the poet Ursula Solek, when she writes:

What, finally, shall we say
In that last moment
When we will be confronted
By the Unimaginable,
The One
Who could not be measured
Or contained
In space or time,
Who was Love
Unlimited?

What shall we answer
When the question is asked
About our undeeds
Committed
In his name -

In the name of him
For whose sake we promised
To have courage,
To abandon everything?

Shall we say
That we didn't know -
That we couldn't hear the clatter
Of hearts breaking -
Millions of them -
In lonely room, in alleys and prisons
And in bars?

Shall we explain
That we thought it mattered
That buildings were constructed
And maintained
In his honor -
That we were occupied
With the arrangements
Of hymns and prayers
And the proper, the responsible way
Of doing things?

Shall we tell him
That we had to take care
Of the orderly definition of dogmas,
So that there was no time
To listen to the sobbing
Of little ones
Huddled in corners,
Or the silent despair
Of those already beyond the sobbing?

Or shall we say this, too:
That we were afraid -
That we were keeping busy with all this
To avoid confrontation
With the reality of his meaning
Which would lead us to repentance -
That it was fear which kept us
Hiding in church pews
And in important boards and committees
When he went by?" 8

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord we believe, help Thou our unbelief
Forgive us our wanting to be the salt of
the salt instead of the salt of the earth.
Send us into the world
to serve as well as lead
to listen as well as speak
to receive as well as give
In the name of our incarnate Christ
Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Barrett, William, Irrational Man, p. 102, Doubleday Co., Garden City, N.Y., 1958
2. Marney, Carlyle, The Recovery of The Person, p. 38 Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1963
3. Niles, D. T., "The Ecumenical Review," p. 391, World Council of Churches, Vol. XX, No. 4, 1968
4. Berkhof, Hendrikus, Christ The Meaning of History, p. 91, John Knox Press, Richmond, Virginia, 1966
5. Berkhof, Hendrikus, Christ The Meaning of History, p. 98, John Knox Press, Richmond, Virginia, 1966
6. Bennett, John, An Address to the Class of 1966 at Princeton Seminary, June 7, 1966
7. Berdyaev, Nicolos, Dream And Reality, p. 307 Macmillan Co., New York, 1951