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OPTIMISM, PESSIMISM, AND RELIGIOUS FAITH

Human vitality has two primary sources, animal impulse and confidence in the meaningfulness of human existence. The more human consciousness arises to full self-consciousness and to a complete recognition of the total forces of the universe in which it finds itself, the more it requires not only animal vitality but confidence in the meaningfulness of its world to maintain a healthy will-to-live. This confidence in the meaningfulness of life is not something which results from a sophisticated analysis of the forces and factors which surround the human enterprise. It is something which is assumed in every healthy life. It is primary religion. Men may be quite unable to define the meaning of life, and yet live by a simple trust that it has meaning. This primary religion is the basic optimism of all vital and wholesome human life.

PRIMITIVE RELIGION

In primitive life the meaning of existence is revealed in the relation of the individual to his group. Life achieves meaning through its organic relation to a social enterprise. This loyalty usually results in some form of totemistic religion which gives a mythical and symbolic expression of the feeling that the value and meaning of the social group really represents absolute meaning. Such totemistic religion remains, in spite of all further elaborations, a permanent source of optimism of some people in all ages and all cultures, who refuse to ask ultimate questions about the relation of the value of their social group to some ultimate source of meaning. Some men achieve a very considerable happiness in their devotion to their family or their com-
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munity or nation without asking any further questions about life's meaning. When national loyalty is reconstructed into an all-absorbing religion, as in modern Germany, we may witness the recrudescence of primitive religion in the modern period on a large scale.

In spite of the comparative satisfaction of many people, both primitive and modern, in a little cosmos, it is inevitable that men should seek to relate their group to a larger source of meaning just as surely as they must relate themselves to the life of the group. Thus animism is as primordial as totemism in the history of religion. In other words, men tried to bring the world of nature into their universe of meaning from the very beginning, and sought to relate their little cosmos to a larger cosmos. The gradual identification of nature gods with the gods of tribes and cities in the religions of early civilization shows how quickly the social cosmos was related to the larger universe, revealed in the world of nature, and a common center and source of meaning was attributed to both of them.

But the simple faith and optimism of primitive man did not exist long without being challenged. The world is not only a cosmos but a chaos. Every universe of meaning is constantly threatened by meaningfulness. Its harmonies are disturbed by discords. Its self-sufficiency is challenged by larger and more inclusive worlds. The more men think the more they are tempted to pessimism because their thought surveys the worlds which lie beyond their little cosmos, and analyzes the chaos, death, destruction and misery which seem to deny their faith in the harmony and meaningfulness of their existence in it. All profound religion is an effort to answer the challenge of pessimism. It seeks a center of meaning in life which is able to include the totality of existence, and which is able to interpret the chaos as something which only provisionally threatens its cosmos and can ultimately be brought under its dominion.

In the Jewish-Christian tradition this problem of pessimism and optimism is solved by faith in a transcendent God who is at once the creator of the world (source of its meaning) and judge of the world (i.e. goal of its perfection). It was this faith in a transcendent God which made it possible for Hebraic religion to escape both the parochial identification of God and the nation and the pantheistic identification of God and the imperfections of historical existence. It provided, in other words, for both the universalism and the perfectionism which are implied in every vital ethics. It is interesting to note that the process of divorcing God from the nation was a matter of both spiritual insight and actual experience. If the early prophets had not said, as Amos, “Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, saith the Lord” (Amos 9:7), faith in the God of Israel might have perished with the captivity of Judah. But it was the exile which brought this process to a triumphant conclusion. A second Israel could build on the spiritual insights of an Amos, and could declare a God who gave meaning to existence quite independent of the vicissitudes of a nation, which had been the chief source of all meaning to the pious Jew.

In the same manner, faith in a transcendent God made it possible to affirm confidence in a meaningful existence even though the world was full of sorrow and evil. Some of the sorrow and misery was attributed to human sin. It was because man sinned that thorns and thistles grew in his field and he was forced to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow. The myth of the fall may solve the problem of evil too easily by attributing all inadequacies of nature to the imperfections of man, but it contains one element of truth found in all profound religion, and that is that it reduces man's pride and presumption in judging the justice of the universe by making him conscious of his own sin and imperfection and suggesting that at least some of the evil from which he suffers is a price of the freedom which makes it possible for him to sin.

It is to be noted that in Hebraic religion the transcendent God is never an escape from the chaos of this world. This world is not meaningless, and it is not necessary to escape from it to another supermundane world in order to preserve an ultimate optimism. For prophetic Judaism, existence in this world is intensely meaningful, though the ultimate center of meaning transcends the world. It knows nothing of the distinction between pure form and concrete existence, or between a virtuous reason and a sinful body. It rejoices in the physical creation. "Lord, how manifold are thy works. In wisdom hast thou made them all" (Ps. 104:24). When the Psalmist faces the fact of death he does not have recourse to hope in immortality to save his optimism. He rather finds the glory of God exalted by the brevity of man. "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past and as a watch in the night" (Ps. 90:4). The threat of death to the meaning of life is destroyed by faith in a purpose which transcends the generations and by the thought that death is in some sense a just
retribution for human evil. "For we are consumed by thine anger and by thy wrath we are troubled. Thou hast set our iniquities before thee and our secret sins in the light of thy countenance" (Ps. 90:8).

The prophetic religion from which Christianity took its rise is therefore not an other-worldly religion. It is thoroughly this-worldly, though it has nothing in common with the secularized this-worldliness of modern culture which finds meaning only in the historical process and knows nothing of a source of existence which transcends the process. Unfortunately, as this religion was philosophically elaborated in Greco-Roman thought, it borrowed something from and was corrupted by Neo-Platonic dualism. Reason always has difficulty with an adequate view of transcendence and immanence. It inclines either to reduce it to a complete dualism or to a complete monism. As a result it expresses a world view which is either too pessimistic or too optimistic to do justice to all the facts of life. An adequate religion is always an ultimate optimism which has entertained all the facts which lead to pessimism. Its optimism is based upon a faith in a transcendent center of meaning which is never fully expressed in any partial value and is never exhausted in any concrete historical reality. But though it is not exhausted in any such reality it is incarnated there. Like the human personality in the human body, it lives in and through the body, but transcends it.

The other-worldliness of classical Christian orthodoxy came to a full expression in the Middle Ages. Though its sense of sin was sometimes morbid, and though it sometimes degenerated into a cult of death, it is not correct to attribute complete other-worldliness to the Middle Ages. Medieval Catholicism was sufficiently this-worldly to attempt the construction of a papal empire which would, through its universalism, transcend all the partial and parochial values of nationalism. It was sufficiently this-worldly even to give a religious sanction to the feudal structure of society, and to fall into the most grievous and the most perennial sin of religion: the sin of using the transcendent reference to absolutize rather than to criticize the partial achievements of history.

THE RELIGION OF MODERN CULTURE

Our modern culture has acquired its most significant characteristics in its conscious and unconscious reaction to medieval culture. Its scientific discoveries made it impatient with the mythical errors of medieval religion. But it failed to realize that mythical descriptions of reality, though always inexact in describing detailed and historical fact, have the virtue of giving men a sense of depth in life. Pure science is always secular and horizontal in its references, and cannot express the vertical tendencies in culture which refer to the ultimate source of meaning in life. Modern culture substituted for the dualism and pessimism of medieval culture a simple naturalistic monism and optimism. It conceived history in dynamic terms and found it easy to identify change with progress, and to ascribe divine attributes to nature. It discovered in the "laws of nature" the very guarantee of the meaningfulness of the universe which it is the business of religion to find.

The religious attitude toward nature and its laws is evident in all of eighteenth-century literature. Holbach becomes religiously lyrical in addressing nature: "O Nature, sovereign of all being," he cries, "and ye her adorable daughters, virtue, reason, truth, remain forever our revered protectors. It is to you belong the praises of the human race." The identification of nature, virtue, reason and truth is a perfect example of the superficiality of this new mythology. The old mythology is sloughed off for being inexact, and a new mythology is created which is supposedly scientific but which ceases to be scientific as soon as it achieves mythical-religious proportions. Its laws are not laws at all, but projections of human ideals ("liberty, property and equality"). Its inability to discriminate between "nature as the entire system of things with the aggregate of all their properties" and "things as they would be without human intervention" (J. S. Mill) reveals that it has no recognition for the problem of depth and height in life. Human ideals are uncritically read into the natural process.

The religion of modern culture is, in other words, a superficial religion which has discovered a meaningful world without having discovered the perils to meaning in death, sin and catastrophe. History has an immediate, an obvious, meaning because it spells progress. Progress is guaranteed by increasing intelligence because human sin is attributed to ignorance which will be removed by a proper pedagogy. It is surprising how little modern culture has qualified the optimism upon this point, first clearly stated by Condorcet. There is no recognition in it of the perils to anarchy which reside in human egoism, particularly collective egoism. The naturalistic optimism is...
revealed not only in its confidence in natural and rational processes, but in its identification of physical comfort with final bliss. Thus Priestley could declare: “Men will make their situation in the world abundantly more easy and comfortable, they will probably prolong their existence in it and grow daily more happy, each in himself, and more able and, I believe, more disposed to communicate happiness to others. Thus whatever the beginning of the world, the end will be paradisaical, beyond what our imaginations can conceive.” Thus an uncritical this-worldliness is substituted for the untenable other-worldliness of medievalism, and men become confused by a superficial optimism in the very moment when they celebrate their emancipation from a morbid pessimism.

Though there is a horde of moderns who still live by and in this kind of uncritical naturalism and optimism, it could not long claim the credulity of the more critical spirits. The simple identification of human ideals with the forces of nature inevitably gave way to a humanistic dualism in which a sharp distinction was drawn between the human and the natural world. No better definition of this dualism is given than that found in Huxley’s famous Romanes lecture on Evolution and Ethics, in which he declared: “The cosmic process has no sort of relation to moral ends; the imitation of it by man is inconsistent with the first principles of ethics.... The ethical progress of society depends not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.” This kind of dualism is more realistic than the older type of naturalism, and it frees human moral life from slavish dependence upon the “laws of nature.” Its general effect is to express optimism in terms of a human world of meaning and to relegate the world of nature to a realm of meaninglessness.

Thus the optimism of pure naturalism degenerates into a fairly consistent pessimism, slightly relieved by a confidence in the meaningfulness of human life, even when its values must be maintained in defiance of nature’s caprices. Bertrand Russell’s now justly famous Free Man’s Worship is a perfect and moving expression of this pessimism. “Brief and powerless is man’s life. On him and all his race the slow sure doom sinks pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, om-