

OUR CONTEMPORARY REPUDIATION OF REASON

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A period in which men are moving in masses is a period in which discriminative, critical thinking is pushed into the background. A time when the attention of men is concentrated upon the one elemental problem of marshaling a preponderance of force in order to overwhelm the massed might of an antagonist, holds little to encourage the cultivation of expertness in analytical judgment. The destructive violence of war is, however, more a consequence than a cause. Back of the conflict of massed armies, and underlying the superficial controversies of political and economic ideologies, is a fundamental shift of faith and interest. We find ourselves in the midst of one of those profound and all-pervasive movements of humanity which swing back and forth between the poles of a primary evaluation of intelligence and emotion. Today we are immersed in a mood of more or less complete repudiation of reason.

I

Take a look at the political scene for illustration. When we sift it down to its elemental underlying presuppositions, the crux of the controversy between a democratic and a totalitarian philosophy of government, reduces to the issue: Is human nature essentially rational in its nature. Or, to see the question more directly in relation to the problem of political structure and process, we might put it: Are the common masses of men capable of intelligent self-discipline? Do they normally respond to rational appeals? Do they react in terms of reasoned conclusions? Can you trust the judgment of the average man, or must some one else do his thinking for him?

The democratic state must be built squarely upon a fundamental assumption that human beings are essentially rational creatures. They do possess

capacities for discriminating judgment. Therefore you can safely entrust to various forms of popular judgment the decision upon major questions of public policy. You can safely permit the widest degree of difference of opinion and radical dissent from established policies of government. You not only can, but it is in the interest of public welfare, to encourage vigorous and radical criticism of the institutions and policies of government. You can trust the mind of the common masses of humanity, if they are given free rein to exercise their intelligence, and untrammelled opportunity, both to possess themselves of the facts that form the basis of a sound judgment, and to face all the conflicting opinions that any given situation may bring to the fore—you can trust the common masses of humanity to arrive at essentially sound judgments. It is obvious that this conviction presupposes that the human mind is essentially rational in its structure and, when given unimpeded opportunity to function, tends to react upon soundly rational premises.

The totalitarian political philosophy proceeds upon a diametrically opposite premise. Back of the whole idea of a totally authoritarian State lies the conviction that human nature is basically emotional rather than rational. The mind of the average man is incapable of following through even a simple process of logical reasoning. The reactions of the human animal are essentially emotional in character. Therefore it is essential that a strictly limited group of selected "leaders" should do the thinking for society. In principle the totalitarian state presupposes that there can be but one operative mind in the state. That is the mind of the "Leader," *par excellence*. Were we to attempt to work out a rigorously logical analysis of the fascist doctrine it

must inevitably lead us inexorably to one solitary intelligence at the apex of the political pyramid. This, in a sense, German National Socialism, and Communism, theoretically undertake to carry through. Both systems have produced an authoritative scripture — **Mein Kampf**, on the one hand, and **Das Kapital** on the other. Both have set up a solitary Master to whose judgment all private or subordinate group judgments must, theoretically, give way. With Russia it may be that Joseph Stalin actually does make all the ultimate decisions. It is very far from certain that Adolph Hitler has ever held anything quite approaching the complete mastery of the German household that Stalin appears to have attained in Russia. And, in spite of the rigorous censorship that effectually blocks and re-fashions all attempts at objective reporting within both Russia and Germany, it still appears certain that within both the Russian Communist Party, and within the ranks of National Socialism, there have flared up stubborn and bitter storms of controversy which have had to be "liquidated" in blood.

It is also true that the totalitarian State stands under no necessity of justifying, by any rational process, any decision of the State. It is enough that the Leader wills it and that the Leader commands sufficient force to secure the execution of his will. The whole totalitarian philosophy represents an immense repudiation of reason. We only need to point to the manner in which the common masses of the population are ruthlessly regimented by shrewdly calculated appeals to emotions. We remind ourselves of the huge mass meetings in which tens of thousands of men and women are crowded into vast assemblies and subjected to every device which the students of crowd psychology have been able to contrive for whipping up the passions and emotions of the mob. We remind ourselves of the rigorous control of press and radio,

making certain that only one point of view is permitted public expression, and that point of view is dinned into the mind of the masses with monotonous reiteration until it becomes almost one with the rhythm of heart-beat and respiration. We remind ourselves of how the possession of a radio which is tuned or tunable to a foreign broadcast is made a capital offense. We think of the manner in which the whole foundation of science has been officially renounced and the total educational system, from pre-school nursery to post-graduate university programs, has been fashioned into one completely controlled propaganda machine. We recall the manner in which the leaders of the state have deliberately played upon latent popular prejudices, shifting the immediate objective of venomous attack at will without any rational basis, according to the shifting needs of diplomatic policy. We need only think of the manner in which National Socialism has attempted to conjure up a sheer myth of "blood and soil" and set forth the notion of a "pure Aryan" racial stock. This whole ideology attained the nadir of irrationality when the exigencies of foreign policy dictated the public recognition of the Japanese people as "Aryans." It is, of course, quite pointless even to attempt to point out how irrational is the whole totalitarian philosophy. It represents, in essence, a complete repudiation of reason.

The thing that is most disturbing about the whole situation is the extent to which apparently intelligent persons within democratic society have been yielding to the pressure of this immense undertow and joining in with the Nazis in their repudiation of reason. It has always proved true, whenever a democracy becomes involved in war, that the exigencies of armed conflict necessarily impose drastic limitations upon the normal processes of critical and deliberative judgment. This we may expect. The thing that is alarming

is the tendency to carry this discounting of intelligence out into every phase of life today. Dr. Ernest Fremont Tittle, in a recent number of **The Christian Century** reports a prominent west coast Legionnaire as dismissing a protest against the unconstitutional abrogation of elementary civil rights with the half-contemptuous retort: "The Bill of Rights is not such a sacred thing." This whole point of view adds up to a studied disparagement of intelligence. We recall the frenzy of demands that all teachers, whether in public or in private schools, be required to subscribe to a formal "oath" as a prerequisite to permitting them to teach. We have witnessed, within recent weeks, the hasty withdrawal by army leaders of a pamphlet, **The Races of Mankind** which ventured to affirm, what every creditable anthropologist who values his standing among scientific men insistently declares, that the human family represents essentially one racial stock, sprung from a common origin. We have seen the development of a variety of "pressure groups" whose objective is to drive through legislation considered favorable by their sponsors or directors, and promote administrative policies which will advance their own private interests. The most sinister factor connected with this familiar political mechanism is that these groups aim to accomplish their ends, not through the marshalling of evidence and the presentation of reasoned arguments, but by various appeals that are essentially emotional in character.

II

The aspect of this situation with which we who are engaged in the administration of the institutions and programs of religion are concerned is the extent to which this repudiation of reason has come to infect our religious attitudes today. We are all aware of the profound shift in currents of thinking that is carrying all branches of the Christian community back in the direction, not only of traditional theo-

logical patterns of thinking, but of what amounts to an attempt to set up afresh an absolute symbol which requires unquestioning acceptance on pain of excommunication. We have become so accustomed to the disparagement of reason, particularly in conservative Protestant circles, that the very term "rational" or "rationalist" stands in much popular thinking as practically synonymous with "agnostic" or even "atheist." It is a notion, so startling as practically certain to provoke vigorous rejection, to suggest that the rise of Protestantism was part and parcel of the emerging rationalistic movement in Western Europe. It is true that Protestants did undertake to substitute another absolute authority—that of the Bible—for the older absolutism of the ecclesiastical institution which meant, of course, essentially, that of the hierarchy. Rome ultimately accepted the logic of her own position by the adoption of the dogma of papal infallibility. And Protestants have found themselves inexorably driven from every stronghold of institutional absolutism through the inescapable implications of the primary appeal to the judgment of the individual.

The authority of the Bible means nothing at all, until we see it in terms of the authority of the mind that reads and interprets the text of the Scripture. The persistent tendency of Protestantism to split up into divisive sects, each one claiming the authority of the infallible Word as its "writ of necessity and convenience," is just another item of evidence pointing to the intimate connection between the whole Protestant movement and the rationalistic movement in Western society. If we are to find our ultimate warrant for organization, for action, or for instruction, in an interpretation of a particular body of tradition which comes to us through a specific literary text, we must, if we are to be consistent in our thinking, recognize the right of appeal to individual opinion in the understanding and inter-

pretation of the text. We may hope for the building of a stable community, through that process, only upon the basis of a conviction that the human mind is such an instrument, and universal human experience is of such a character, that, when the approved text is submitted freely to the critical judgment of the average man, we may count upon his intelligence to support the common convictions that constitute the basis of an enduring community of faith.

Tragedy arises out of the fact that so many earnest Protestants seem unwilling to trust to the intelligence of the average man the determination of the meaning of Scripture or the definition of the articles of faith. Over and over we find ourselves faced with the peremptory demand that we accept a given "word of Scripture" on faith, asking no questions. The point that we do not recognize is that, in every such instance, the peremptory demand really amounts to the insistence that we accept not the text itself, but the particular interpretation of the meaning of the text which our interlocutor is pleased to accept and hold. We would not object so strenuously to this demand if only it were supported upon the basis of arguments that appeal to intelligence. In all too many instances, however, to venture even to ask a question, seeking clarification of the proposition, is interpreted as an evidence of sin. We are fairly bludgeoned in the direction of a blind, unquestioning acceptance of the dogmatic proposition. This, clearly, represents essentially a repudiation of reason, a discounting of all those values that give to human living dignity and worth, and a reduction of the human spirit to the levels of irrational emotional reaction.

One of the most widely recognized leaders of the contemporary conservative movement in American theological thinking, in a volume published some five or six years ago, bluntly insisted that there are truths which the

human reason is incapable of apprehending. These truths must be accepted on faith. This proposition has a specious appeal until we come to give it closer examination. Placed under the spot-light of critical analysis it reduces virtually to little more than a collection of nonsense syllables. It ought to be clear, even to the simple minded, that it is with the intelligence, and with the intelligence alone, that human beings come to an understanding of meanings. No dogmatic proposition of whatever character can by any stretch of the imagination be characterized as "truth" unless it is capable of apprehension by intelligence and of incorporation into a more or less coherent whole of meaning, through the exercise of our critical faculties. Until that is done, it remains essentially nothing other than a mere meaningless symbol, which may serve as a trigger signal to set off some more or less standardized pattern of emotional reactions.

Whenever men set "faith" over against "reason" as a more dependable avenue of approach to the apprehension of truths necessary to salvation, they are substantially discounting reason and setting up relative degrees of emotional tension and warmth of feeling as the touch-stone of validity in religious experience. They are saying that we discover the presence of God, and attest the validity of opinions about Him, in terms of the degree of emotional disturbance that accompanies the validating experience. Take the matter of conversion for illustration. Methodist people have cherished the conviction that every man might know beyond the peradventure of any doubt that he has become a child of God. The whole focus of attention and interest in evangelism has tended to center upon the question, how we may identify the experience of salvation. And in most instances the experience is identified by the degree of emotional excitement that accompanies it. It is the emotional element that testifies to the presence

of God, not the quality of meaning that the experience brings to the white-hot moment of decision and acceptance. Take, again, the much debated question of a "second blessing" or a "baptism of the Holy Spirit," that constantly springs up among groups who become intent upon the quest for an unimpeachably valid experience of God. Whether we look within Methodist ranks in groups who frequent holiness assemblies, or whether we join up with the Pentecostal people in search of the "gift of tongues," in all too many instances, we are advised that we shall identify the unmistakable presence of the Spirit of God in the kind of experience which sets a man's rational faculties temporarily in abeyance, and lets loose the reins of feeling and emotion.

We might take, again, the term "spiritual" and note the direction in which we have been prone to search for meaningful content for the term. There is probably no other single word, widely used in the vocabulary of religion, that is so mistily vague and confusedly undefined as this. Just precisely what do we mean by a "spiritual" life? It always carries with it a sense of the incorporeal, the intangible, the insubstantial. This, reduced to its essential meaning, often signifies little more than a vague recognition that universal and abiding meanings transcend the temporal and spatial categories that so largely condition our human experience. In too many instances, when we use the term "spiritual," if we will only give the matter careful examination we will discover that we are again substituting the warmth and intensity of emotional fervor for clarity and consistency of meaning as the mark of genuineness and reality. If we will only return to an open-minded re-examination of the Scriptures, we will discover that this comes very close to the center of the controversy which the Hebrew prophets carried on with the popular religion of

their day. The Bible reflects a wide variety of interpretations of religion, it is true. But in the main we will find that, throughout the whole succession of the prophets, the thought of Israel moved consistently in the direction of a recognition of a substantial rational element in the notion of what constitutes genuine "spiritual" living. Certainly, there is nothing in the teaching of the great Hebrew prophets that will give any support to the notion that the "spiritual" is to be discovered in the highly emotional, in the breaking free from the disciplines and controls of critical thinking.

III

There are three tendencies in contemporary Christian living that may hold some hope for a stemming of the tide which is swinging strongly against any recognition of reason and in the direction of an acceptance of pure emotion as the mark of genuineness and reality in religion. There is, for one, the very trend toward a re-affirmation of traditional theological positions, to which we have already had occasion to refer. Whatever we may think about the character of the dogmatic positions to which this neo-traditionalism is pointing today, we may hail the return to a recognition of the importance of theology with profound gratitude. We appear to be about to emerge from the blighting influence of a generation of diligent teaching that, with studied purpose, discounted any attempt to face those ultimate issues that have been the body and substance of philosophy and theology, or to seek to find answers for the questions that they raise. The blight of an instrumentalist school of thought, which has, unhappily fastened its tentacles upon a whole generation of public education in America, is beginning to give way before a growing recognition of the appalling tragedy that it has produced in contemporary society. These ultimate questions simply will not down. Within the past ten years two distinguished University

Presidents have boldly announced their purpose to rebuild the whole pattern and structure of higher education around a central core of theology. Dr. Daniel L. Marsh, in dreaming out the plan for a totally new campus for Boston University proposes to set the School of Theology in the Central unit, designed and constructed after the pattern of one of the magnificent medieval sanctuaries of England. Dr. Robert Maynard Hutchins, after toying for a time with the notion that Aristotelian philosophy would serve the purpose, has recently come all the way across to the position that sees in Christian theology the only adequate basis upon which to build an adequate philosophy of life for today. In making the Dean of the Divinity School the Dean of the Faculties of the University, President Hutchins is setting about implementing his idea in specific administrative procedures. Once we accept whole-heartedly the importance of theology and set about facing up to the fundamental issues of life, with which theology has to do, we cannot stop until we have gone the whole way and recognized the imperative necessity of bringing all forms of emotional expression under the discipline and control of the processes of intelligence.

The rapidly changing scene among the psychologists is taking us in substantially the same direction. For the better part of a generation, now, we have been intent upon the exploration of that dark and mysterious subterranean limbo, below the threshold of consciousness, which we have come to understand exercises so potent an influence in determining the character of human behavior. We have navigated the troubled waters of those narrowing channels in which the hyper-zealot sought to reduce all human motivation to one single sinister thread of sex or libido. We have gone through the period in which the adolescent would-be science of the psychiatrist was proposing to take over all the unsolved

problems of society and reduce them to kindergarten techniques. One of the outcomes to which we seem to be moving is the general recognition of the importance of understanding the nature of these abnormal psychoses. The growing interest, among theological students, and the younger ministers, in the mastery of the elements of psychological analysis, offers definite promise of an improved effectiveness in the attack upon the problem of mal-adjusted personality by the representative of the Church. On the other hand, the development and refining of the methods of psychological analysis have brought a surprising re-affirmation of the essential soundness of the method of religion in dealing with these same problems of personality. There has come, too, a growing recognition that the Christian Minister, or the psychiatrist who approaches his task from the point of view of an acceptance and an understanding of the basic premises of the Christian faith, has, in his hands a resource that a purely secular practitioner does not possess. He has an understanding of the meaning of the experiences with which he deals, that enables him to lay a far more secure foundation for permanent recovery. All of this adds up to a definite turning away from the acceptance of the bizarre, the irrational, and the mysteriously uncontrollable emotional outburst, in the direction of a renewed appreciation of rationally disciplined and meaningful experience as the valid test of genuine reality in religion.

The fearful disruption of all the normal and established institutions and practices of society, which this war has brought to the world, is constraining everyone, who faces life with any degree of serious purpose, to a re-examination of the ethical implications of his faith. There is no doubt that one of the major factors in producing the seeming ineffectiveness and irrelevance of religion and the church, during the past

generation, has been the almost total lack of any substantial consensus of opinion concerning the meaning of Christian teaching for the most critical issues of today. We have had no end of sentimental leaping to conclusions. We have had a perfect spate of "resolutionizing." The sobering realities of a global war, organized and fought upon a "total" pattern, are compelling Christian leaders generally to undertake a good deal of fundamental thinking. One thing is clear. We shall never solve the issues which the intolerable contradiction between the spirit and ideals of Jesus and the prevailing practices of state-craft, including the acceptance and glorification of war, present, upon the basis of any more shallow sentimental emotionalism.

Amid all the confusion and violence of cross-currents of controversy which have disturbed, not only society in the large, but the Christian community itself, there are slowly, but steadily, maturing a body of convictions that are moving toward something approximating unanimity among those who accept the designation as "Christian." This applies to a good deal more than the particular question of the legitimacy of the resort to armed violence. It applies to such collateral questions as the spirit of prejudice between races, the character of the pattern of economic organi-

zation which determines industrial relationships, the sharp antithesis between a narrow isolationist nationalism and the claims of a growing world neighborhood. It may very well be that we are moving toward another period in which the thinking of the Christian community, which now is deeply rooted in all of the primary cultural areas of the earth, will come to articulate expression in terms of identifiable and enforceable pattern of living. This, again, must inevitably lead us to a renewed commitment to bring all of life under the discipline of the processes of intelligence. It will point in the direction of an increasing coherence in our understanding of the ultimate values and goals of living. It must make for increasing consistency in the reconstruction of our finite human behavior in substantial congruence with the character of the structure and process of Reality that surrounds us, and in which we recognize that we, ourselves, are integral elements. It does not mean a dampening of the emotional fires. It rather points toward the more effective utilization of the profound forces which they represent, as they are harnessed to serve the high goals of worthwhile living. It will mean, through the return to rational and intelligent behavior, a fresh beginning in genuinely spiritual living.