

Religion and the Mind of Today

FRANCIS W. BRUSH

AS ONE considers the mind of yesterday and the mind of today, one significant contrast emerges. The mind of yesterday was usually **closed**; the mind of today is more often **open**. In most cases, even those men of yesterday who were in conscious revolt simply traded one certainty for another. Our founding fathers were just as sure that they had been endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights as the founders and rulers of European nations were sure that they ruled by divine right. The physical scientists rebelled against the divinely revealed dogmas of a supernatural being only to set up their own absolutes; time and space, energy and ether. The choice between supernaturalism on the one hand and materialism on the other was a choice between two closed systems. No wonder the mind of yesterday had trouble choosing between them! This same inflexibility of concept characterized yesterday's thinking about the social environment. Ethical concepts were absolutes: guaranteed by either the moral law of the universe or by conscience, "the voice of God within." Churches founded in protest against the dogmatic authority of "the church" soon had their own creedal statement and proclaimed themselves to be "the **true** church." As opposed to this kind of thinking, the contemporary intellectual has witnessed the gradual emergence of various theories of relativity or approximation. This challenge of the mind of yesterday by the mind of today is gradually penetrating every institution and every individual of our culture.

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I.

This loss of dogmatic intellectual absolutes, has left millions with a value vacuum. In ethics, for example, if the only reason for being good is to keep from going to hell, but there is no such place, there is no reason for a man to be good. In religion, if one considers the God of Dante's *Inferno* or Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the hands of an Angry God"—and the dominant place such religious ideas had in the mind of yesterday—it is easy to understand that their loss has affected man's emotional life. As Edna St. Vincent Millay's Ricardo says in *Conversation at Midnight*, "Man has not been the same since God died; he has taken it very hard." Of course not: for life apart from God is not the same as life as a part of God.

Go to people and ask, "Have you lost God?" Some will tell you they have with a shrug of the shoulders but others will answer with tears in their eyes. The former remind me of an incident associated with a New York showing of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, that simple but impressive picture of a small town in New Hampshire of a generation ago—a town filled with people whose order of life was shaped by a religious perspective. At the close of a certain performance, a prosperous New Yorker and his wife, who had evidently grown up in a small town like Grover's Corners, were talking. The man said to his wife complacently, "Well, that's where we came from, dear." She returned an unexpected answer: "Yes, and I'm wondering where we've got to!" "To those with tears in their eyes, the kingdom of God is an abandoned farm, the blue vaulted heavens are brass to their prayer. In the crises of life they stand desolately

alone and as the waves wash over them, there is no God in the place. . . . Nothing but an unread book; a haunting memory and a great loneliness!" So Winifred Rhoades describes the condition in her book, **Have You Lost God?**

This vacuum has invaded the campus. Conditioned children become conditioned coeds. As John Lathrop reports in his **Sermon to a Perplexed Generation**: "I can see her now as she came into my study; 18 or 19 years old, and on her face a puzzled frightened look. She had been brought up in a small town in the midst of a great farming country and had always gone to the church on Main Street. By a wave of the hand, she had found herself in the midst of a throbbing college life: of which even the living conditions and conventions were strange. But this was not what troubled her most. It was at her seat in the classroom that she was perplexed. Here everything that she assumed unquestioningly as a part of her established order of the world was brought up with a huge interrogation mark after it. The origin and nature of the world and of man: Truth, what it is and how we know; the Right, what it is and how are we sure? And the thousand other matters that make up the contents of our minds and determine our conduct. As I studied her," says John Lathrop, "she seemed to fade as an individual, and in her place, I saw a composite creature with various backgrounds that looked out upon a chaotic welter into which any venture of thought or action would be without certainty of any sort." This then is the Value Vacuum created by a reaction to the mind of yesterday in the community and on the campus.

Although the literary men of today seem to be aware of the problem, one of their number, T. S. Eliot, has aptly pointed out that "people who read modern literature in order to find some organizing principles for living can hardly expect to find adequate answers when the authors themselves have

none." Unfortunately, Eliot demonstrates his own thesis when he says "the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call secularism!" For the mind of today such name-calling or scape-goating makes confusion more confounded rather than clarifying the basic issues. To say that modern literature is **corrupted** by secularism, depends of course on the definition of the term. Secularism originally referred to a system of social ethics based on the doctrine that ethical standards and conduct should be determined exclusively with reference to the present life and social well being. For the mind of today such secularism has many advantages in comparison with imposed standards of supposedly supernatural origin. However, as usually used today, the term refers to any view of life based on the premise that religion and religious considerations should be ignored or excluded. For the mind of today such secularism has many disadvantages compared with a view of life based on the premise that religion and religious considerations should not be arbitrarily ignored or excluded. Is Eliot thinking about a return to yesterday or a march toward tomorrow? Although the problem may be dramatically portrayed by literary men, the solution to the issue for the mind of today is basically historical and philosophical. Let us then return to Lathrop's three questions: Truth, what is it and how do we know? The Right, what it is and how are we sure? The Origin and Nature of the world and man, what is it?

The following briefly stated propositions, I believe, present the position of the Mind of Today—the Open Mind.

Question: Truth, what is it and how do we know? or, how do we get, test and regard our ideas?

Answer: for the mind of today, man's funded knowledge is the result of cognitive activity at specific identifiable, or inferable, times and places. This concept of knowledge affirms that informative ideas are progressive, provisional and subject to public check, that

method of reflective, critical and creative thinking, can, and should be used in the solution of problems in all areas. The question is not: can we deal with values as well as facts? with ourselves, and with our world society, by using our heads? but simply how long it will take us to recognize the significance of this new knowledge? This concept preserves respect for the conclusions of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas as sincere and relevant in their day, but does not confine us to the darkness of yesterday. We do not lose the mature insights of religious seers—Buddha and Confucius, the prophets and Jesus—but we attempt to prevent their ideas from becoming crystallized dogmas. In the field of religion, references to sacred writings, dogmas or ancient creed are to be used as suggestions, not as authoritarian or final conclusions.

Question: The Right, What is it and how are we sure? or, what are the ways of seeking, evaluating and achieving values?

Answer: for the mind of today our human values are the result of continuing cooperative relationships with the culture and the cosmos that surround us. Men form, join and support institutions, because united they can satisfy needs and aspirations that no man can achieve alone. For the mind of today there is no one supreme institution. To the extent that any institution speaks only in behalf of its own interests and places itself above or apart from other institutions in the culture, it jeopardizes its own interests and injures the whole. The mind of today seeks to support, as Overstreet puts it, "those religions which foster the creativity and maturity of man and denies the validity of those which tend to keep man immature and in childish dependence on an all-commanding deity or an authoritarian institution." In the area of Ethics, Schweitzer tells that in his hospital, if he asks members of certain primitive tribes to do a very small service to a nearby patient he will inquire the name of the tribe to which

the other belongs. If it is not his own tribe he will answer, "This is not my brother," and no amount of persuasion or force will induce him to perform the act. This may be where we began as "Man" and where some primitive peoples still are, but for the mind of today that is not where we would end!

Question: The Origin and Nature of the world and man: what is it, what are the ways of viewing the "totality of things" including nature, culture and human nature?

Answer: for the Mind of Today, our world is one and man is a part of, not apart from, this vast universe. "Man," as Max Otto says in *Science and the Moral Life*, "is a part of the order of things along with the lower animals, plants, rocks and star clusters," but Man is not a "mere animal; all his intellectual, moral and esthetic powers—his ideas of decency and feeling of good will—all he aspires to be is the consummation of a long struggle to outgrow his animal status. If his behavior is constructive and creative he is moral. If his behavior is destructive and sterile he is immoral." The one world concept can be approached by way of an analogy. A visitor to Sulgrave Manor, the ancestral home of the Washingtons in England, has reported that for many years a splendid upper-room had a low ceiling, which made the place seem cramped and oppressive, but one day it was discovered that the original structure had been different. The removal of the low ceiling disclosed a lofty, raftered roof that made the room spacious and glorious. "The building," the guide explained, "had been designed to be a Benedictine Abbey, but later generations, turning it to more practical purposes had put in the temporary ceiling of lath and plaster—with the result that men's vision no longer soared." This is a parable of what the mind of yesterday did with God. Once men worshipped a God who was everywhere round about them. Then men divided the world into two parts and put God above the ceiling.

Man is down here, God is up there. Deity — Jupiter, Thor, Jehovah — is a supernatural being. Man, in turn, is a creature who naturally dwells outside the compass of divine life. The problem is one of faulty or arbitrary definition. . . Why not take out the ceiling and get God and man together again?

For the mind of today this is the way to deal with the Value Vacuum. The Hebrew prophets, the Greek philosophers, the founders and fathers, scholastics and reformers of the church, all are a part of our heritage, but the mind of today welcomes streams of living water from all cultures and all coun-

tries, from all areas of human thought. To some the great issue of our day is Christianity, or some other religion, vs. agnosticism or atheism. To the mind of today the issue is **The Closed Mind**, expressed in irreligious or religious creeds vs. **The Open Mind**, including freedom of speech even from the non-believers and freedom of worship for all religions. Literary men may portray the problem of contemporary man, but the mind of today looks to its historians and philosophers for synoptic answers. May the School of the Prophets continue to make her contribution to the mind of today and tomorrow.

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