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"THE RETURN OF RELIGION"

AN ADDRESS

By

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or

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In all our literature, there is probably no keener appraisal of man's experience with Christianity than Gilbert Chesterton's remark that "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting - it has been found difficult and not tried."

Chesterton was a man of letters, not a man of science - but in that aphorism he became for a moment a psychoanalyst of no small capacity. He looked into the inner minds of many of those who claim that Christianity has failed and saw that their contention is not so much an expression of conviction as a somewhat pathetic attempt to camouflage their own failure to give Christianity a fair trial.

It isn't Christianity that has failed. Christianity was hewn from the rock that is truth, and truth is everlasting, no matter how much the trappings of civilization may change from one century or one generation to another.

The failure rests with the human factor. It is mankind that came up to the test - to the point where Christianity should be applied as well as professed - and turned away to easier paths of living.

It isn't that we did not know how to apply Christianity to our daily work and our daily associations. The trouble was that we were more anxious to live in another way. We found the path of selfish materialism simpler and more inviting, and we hastened blithely along it until we stumbled into the swamp from which we are now slowly emerging.

Unknowingly, perhaps, but enthusiastically, we encouraged a selfish exploitation of the world's manpower, a reckless misuse and wastage of our natural wealth, and an insolent perversion of money to control the lives of defenseless individuals. And it is no surprise that these abuses brought in their train corruption and graft in the public service, autocratic denial of civil liberties, and destructive war between labor and its employers.

We traveled so fast and so far away from the Christian life that in 1891 the great pontiff Leo was moved to exclaim that there had been laid "upon the masses of the poor a yoke little better than slavery itself."

It is because man has found religion difficult and failed to give it a trial that the prophets of gloom have been able to keep telling us for 2000 years and more that the end of religion is just around the corner.

Their laments have been found in the tablets of Babylon and the papyri of Egypt, in the preachments of Hebrew prophets and the writings of the literati of ancient Greece. Livy and Tacitus, among others, renewed the sad prophecy in the days of Rome, and after them we find the same melancholy tale in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, in the messages that despairing men inscribed on English church walls at the time of the Black Death, and we find it here and there in the works of Bacon, Spencer, Milton, and even the philosophic Shakespeare.

And so it is today. We are told that religion is perishing and giving way to science, that Christianity has failed to show us the way to a more sensible social organization.

But science has not replaced religion. It never will because it never can. Science at best can only help men to know better themselves and the world they live in, and supply them with the tools to fashion a better world. And no reasonable person will begrudge science all honor for what it has already achieved.

But as far as real human progress is concerned, science is pretty much a helpless thing. Science is helpless unless there is in men the kind of spirit that will direct their use of the tools and knowledge of science in a socially responsible way.

There is only one place to look for that kind of spirit, and that is to a renewed and vigorous religion.

The pessimists who claim that Christianity has seen its best days offer as evidence the economic breakdown of the greatest nations that subscribe to the Christian faith.

Superficially, they have a case. Here in the Western World where the vast majority of Christians live, we have seen selfishness give rise to wholesale human misery, even though it was Christ who said, "What does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?" Here, also, we have achieved the greatest skill in the methods of war, although the One we acknowledge as Master preached "peace on earth, good

will toward men."

But actually these paradoxes are Exhibit No. 1 that religion is now and always has been the key to human happiness. These paradoxes exist only because we did not give Christianity a chance. As Chesterton said, we found it difficult and turned our backs on it.

That is where the pessimists make their mistake. Either they do not realize that Christianity actually has not been tried, or they do realize it and hope to cover up their own failure to try Christianity by claiming that it has failed.

President Roosevelt, in his letter to the Eucharistic Congress last year, made this statement: "I doubt if there is any problem in the world today - social, political or economic - that would not find happy solution if approached in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount."

That statement of what our experience with religion should be takes rank, in my estimation, with Chesterton's analysis of what our experience with religion has been. The essential truth of both cannot be successfully denied.

Where would we be today if we had actually approached life in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount? What would be our condition if, during the past 100 years, we had gone about our work in the faith that "A man's life doth not consist in the abundance of things which he possesseth"? Would we still have suffered as the human

family has suffered in the last ten years?

It would never have happened. There would have been some minor sorrows, of course, for even Christianity cannot make man infallible. But the tragic chapters of the Great Depression and the Great War would not have been written. We would not have been plagued, here in America, by decades of unnecessary industrial strife. We would not have tolerated the perversion of democracy by corruption of public officials to the degree that it has taken place in our cities, our states, and sometimes our federal government.

I do not wish to be understood as saying that all of this is due to human weakness - and certainly not that it is due to the weakness and selfishness of a few. Both of those attitudes, in my estimation, are out of balance and lacking in perspective.

It may be true that today the weaknesses which most men inherit and the stubbornness of a few are helping to slow down our progress toward a more stable economy. But I do not believe we can appraise the past fairly unless we recognize that natural conditions were actually favorable to the irresponsible, reckless course we followed. America in 1800 was ripe for exploitation just as the whole world outside of Europe was ripe for exploitation after Columbus unveiled a new horizon in 1492. Entire continents lay open for men to conquer, and it is hardly strange if they were dazzled by the sight.

But all that is past. The only good that can come from a study of it is possible help in steering a saner course in the years ahead.

The question now is how to remedy the lack that we know exists and that has brought us to our present situation. How shall we open the doors of politics and business and science to religion and revive once more the notion of man's responsibility to his fellow man?

It might be pleasant if there were some panacea - some method of leading men back to religion by inoculation. But the chances are that nothing of the sort exists or ever will exist. Those who are inclined to search for a shortcut to the Christian community will probably search in vain.

But even if it were desirable, I do not believe we need to search for a panacea. If I read human history aright - and I believe there are many thoughtful persons who will agree - mankind has been moving all through the centuries not toward less religion but more of it. In his heart, the average man knows that life without religion is a hollow thing lacking real significance - that without religion, history is meaningless and the gallant army of martyrs have died in vain. He realizes that "Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." Even when the glitter of a purely materialistic prosperity led him astray, the average man knew, deep down in his heart, the infinite superiority of spiritual values.

And now that we have been shocked by depression into a more sensible attitude toward life's problems, I believe we are ready once more to "lift our eyes unto the hills" and take up again the steady march toward a civilization that is intelligent because it is just.

I believe that every day more and more Americans are coming to realize that religion does not exist in a vacuum, as we seem to have thought prior to 1929.

There is a story told by Dean Christian Gauss of Princeton which illustrates that attitude better than anything else I might tell you. It was in the boom days of the nineteen twenties and Dean Gauss had listened to a preacher attacking quite eloquently certain phases of the capitalistic system. On leaving the church, he asked a member of the congregation - a successful business man who contributed generously to the support of the church - what he thought of the sermon. "That's not my idea of religion," the business man said. "I go to church to hear good doctrine and not doubtful economics. I wish Doctor X. would stick to his last."

It is that viewpoint - the notion that religion is some pretty ornament, dissociated entirely from every-day life, that I believe we are gradually leaving behind us. For the grim realities of mass unemployment and mass insecurity have made it plainer than could any words of man that religion is as meaningless unless it is applied and practiced in every-day life, as life is meaningless without religion.

Had we understood that sooner, we would not need to be so concerned today about those who declare that our economic system, and perhaps our political system, should be scrapped and replaced by others. We would not have to fear that the people may be led to adopt some extremist systems, when actually what we need is not new systems but

a new approach to the old systems.

But now these dangers do exist. Whether we like it or not, that fact must be faced, and faced with a granite-like determination to meet a practical situation with practical measures.

We face the threat of economic collectivism - the great leveller that reduces all men to the shape of nameless cogs in one great wheel. We must meet it with a revitalized and humanized system of private enterprise, with the intelligent kind of economic organization that provides useful work at decent pay for all men who are willing to work.

We must meet it with a comprehensive program of housing for those who live in substandard dwellings, and with a sound program of medical care for those who would otherwise sicken or die while the benefits of medical science lie within their sight but beyond their grasp.

We must meet that threat with adequate insurance against the insecurity of the aged and the unemployed.

We must meet it with new opportunities for the youth who, in other lands, became the stern troopers of the despotism that waits outside our gates.

We face the challenge of political tyranny which denies that the individual has either the right to liberty or the need for liberty.

We must meet that challenge with more democracy, with stronger safe-guards of every political and civil right for every individual in our ranks.

We must meet it by freeing our political system of every unclean practice, every alliance with vice and crime, every person or group whose business it is to use the processes of democracy for private gain.

These tasks are not foreign to religion. They are part and parcel of it. Not only will they be achieved by practice of the doctrines of the church, but the church itself has a vital stake in their achievement. The essential faith of Christianity and the essential faith of democracy are one and the same. It is the faith that the human personality is inherently free; that every man is endowed with certain rights founded in the very nature of human living; and that there is a code of justice - of wrong-doing and right-doing - that is not subject to change by the law of man.

Our people want to keep democracy. That is the outstanding fact about our life as a nation today, 150 years after it began. They want to keep democracy, knowing that despite the ills which they have suffered under it, democracy is the only just way of human living.

And because of the events of the past ten years, they are coming to a new realization that the only way to preserve democracy is through religion.

Donoso Cortes, distinguished ambassador from Spain to France at the time of the Third French Revolution, was once asked to what circumstance he owed his recent conversion to the Christian faith.

"I do not recall any," he replied; "my life has been very commonplace. Yet perhaps one feeling of mine has been pleasing to

God. I have never regarded the poor man who sat at my gate as any other than my brother."

In that spirit, I am persuaded, the American family will move steadily toward a democracy more complete than any yet known to mankind.

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