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Religion in a Secular Age

THE SEARCH FOR FINAL MEANING

John Cogley

Preface by Arnold Toynbee



Published by The Pall Mall Press Ltd.,
5 Cromwell Place, London S.W.7

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SBN 269.67032.7

RELIGION IN A SECULAR AGE: THE SEARCH FOR FINAL MEANING
is a *Britannica Perspective* prepared to commemorate
the 200th anniversary of *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Printed by offset in Great Britain by
The Garden City Press Ltd., Letchworth

611101
173.83107

Preface *by Arnold Toynbee*

I

IN RELIGION THE WHOLE of a human being's personality is involved: the emotional and moral facets of the human psyche above all, but the intellectual facet as well. And the concern extends to the whole of Man's World; it is not limited to that part of it which is accessible to the human senses and which can therefore be studied scientifically and can be manipulated by technology. Every human being finds that he has been born into a world which is mysterious, because the part of it that is accessible, intelligible, and manageable is not self-contained and not self-explanatory, and is therefore apparently a fragment of some partly inaccessible larger whole. Taken by itself, the accessible fragment does not make sense. The key to a full understanding of this part of Man's World that is accessible to Man through his senses (including introspection), and through scientific thought working on sense data, seems to lie in that other part of his World which is not accessible to him in this way.

A human being's religious concern therefore leads him to ask questions that cannot be answered in terms of common sense or of science. He is led to ask these questions because he is compelled to take some line about them by the practical problems that he comes up against. He has to find answers to these baffling questions in order to take the action that he has to take in consequence of his being alive. These answers cannot be confirmed by common sense or be verified by science. Yet a human being has to work them out and act upon them because they alone meet a need of his that cannot be met either by science or by common sense. They give him a chart or picture of the world in which he finds himself, including the part of it—perhaps the most important part—that is beyond the ken of both common sense and science. Judged by scientific standards, the picture of Man's World that is given by religion is speculative, unverifiable, inconclusive. But, for the practical purpose of living a human life—and this is a formidable job—the merit of the religious picture of Man's World is that it is a comprehensive one. It gives Man a working basis for coping with the fundamental problems of human life, which cannot be dealt with adequately on the basis of the fragmentary picture of the World that is given by sense

ous and unremitting. Every seminary professor for decades thereafter was required to take an annual anti-Modernist oath, as were bishops, pastors, and the heads of monastic orders. In Protestantism, modernized Christianity found expression in practically all the major denominations and even resulted in the formation of new ones that cut themselves off from the central body of classical Reformation doctrine. Reform Judaism, as Herberg noted, arose from the same impulse to bring religious practice into harmony with the contemporary spirit.

In the Western world, these modernist movements led to the establishment of Ethical Culture Societies and the International Humanist and Ethical Union—associations that no longer even accept the designation of “religious.” In the Orient and the Middle East, the same tendency was reflected in certain new religions, for example Baha’i, a syncretistic faith that upholds a high standard of ethical conduct, respects the central spiritual significance of all major religious figures, and rejects particularistic dogmas, like most Asian religions; but Baha’i also proclaims its own essential harmony with science, upholds the equal rights of men and women, insists on universal education, rejects asceticism and monasticism, and supports the creation of a universal language. It found wide acceptance in the West.

Abraham Lincoln, a non-denominational Christian, spoke for the distrust of creeds and exaltation of humanistic ethics when he wrote: “When any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualifications for membership the Savior’s condensed statement of the substance of both the law and the gospel, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself—that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul.’”⁶

In the words of Jerome Nathanson, a contemporary Ethical Culture leader, those who have chosen the modernist way have opted for “dignity without dogma.” Nathanson, explaining how “modernized” versions of the older faiths arose as this-world-centred, independent spiritual associations, wrote of their followers: “As children, they were taught to hold certain beliefs, but as they grew up they found that they no longer believed these things. This did not happen because they *wanted* to disbelieve or because they were ‘bad’ people. It happened because their experience and development and intelligence led them to question or doubt their earlier beliefs.”⁷

“Modernized” religion, while it disdains what it looks upon as a superstitious clinging to traditional dogma, usually is not only highly respectful of the humane insights offered by the theological thinkers of the ages but also recognizes

the capacity of the older faiths to fulfill the human need for ritual, endow members with a sense of community, and establish ethical norms of universal value. Recognizing these needs, some modernized religions even incorporate ritual and a kind of sacramentalism in their structure. In general, though, they attribute the development of creeds and liturgies not to revelation from on high but to the inventiveness of churchmen and the hunger of the masses for signs and wonders.

Latter-day religion of this kind is found mainly in the West, where the new outlook has been securely established. However, as modernity spreads to other parts of the world, “reform” versions of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and the other great faiths are also emerging as attempts are made to accommodate ancient religious practices to the realities of contemporary life.

Withdrawal

A second mode of response to the claims of modernity can perhaps best be subsumed under the heading of “withdrawal”—or deliberate isolation and separation from the world being shaped by modern concepts.

At least three types of withdrawal can be noted. The first may be called a perfectionist withdrawal, the second a ghetto withdrawal, and the third a cultist withdrawal.

The perfectionist withdrawal is based on a decision to live as much as possible outside modern society. The world of ordinary men is deemed hopelessly corrupt. For if anything is clear it is that it has chosen to ignore the prophetic warnings of the perfectionists’ prophets and is obstinately set on achieving its own spiritual and even physical destruction. The perfectionist’s major obligation to the outside world, then, is to point the way to salvation in bold, clear, uncompromising injunctions and at the same time to have as little as possible to do with others. Clearly, a great deal of sacrifice and stamina is required to create a small cosmos where the special values of the religious community are upheld and its ideals lived out in practice. In such a setting resistance to the rest of mankind becomes a highly valued virtue; life becomes a series of yeas and nays.

Frequently the isolation is symbolized by uniform clothing; outside influences (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies) are banned in order to prevent corruption of those within the compound, especially those who are young and impressionable. Normally the perfectionist group is economically self-supporting, and it is almost always apolitical, even anti-political. Yinger held that sects of this kind are “orthodox” to the point of fanaticism. “At first glance,” he wrote, “this [emphasis on strict orthodoxy] does not seem to be an adaptation to the problems of the religiously disinherited; but it becomes meaningful as a way of saying: we belong to a very highly selected and

⁶ Quoted by Henry Champion Deming in *Eulogy of Abraham Lincoln*, A. N. Clark, Hartford, Conn., 1865, as cited in Rosten, op. cit., p. 216.

⁷ Rosten, *ibid.*, pp. 216–217.