

INERTIA AND FAITH

BY HAROLD BERMAN

MAN is an essentially conservative and tradition-bound creature. This tendency of his is especially noticeable in the realm of the things abstract and unmaterial, the things concrete man is able to apprehend with either one of his five senses, so that he could detect their defects if any, or their shortcomings, if they fail to respond to his own needs. Nor does he entertain any vague or superstitious fear of them, being that he is familiar with their properties and physical limitations. Not so, however, with the things abstract, things which men cannot perceive at all but may only speculate about one way or another. In such matters he feels not only uneasy and uncertain, but it is quite possible besides to "take the dare out of him," so to say, by attributing all sorts of hypothetical and unproved powers to them. Hence, we find that while man is ever-ready to exchange his personal and home furnishings or the implements of his business for newer and more efficient or more decorative ones whenever he becomes convinced of the inferiority of his present tools to the newer ones, he is hesitant about exchanging his outworn mental furniture for those that are more in harmony with the state of his own and humanity's intellectual development and knowledge at any certain given time or stage of his, or it's, development. Being that these concepts are not visible to his physical eye, or subject to the sense of touch or smell, his process of rationalization limited, while his fear of the unseen elements great—and balanced, once more, by his mental inertia—he allows himself to render lip service to objects and to concepts that in his more sober and more analytical moments, when these moments do come

upon him, he would view as quite outworn and meaningless to him in his present mental and intellectual status.

Nowhere in human life is this clash between the abstract and the concrete elements out of which our life is woven so noticeable as in the realm of faith. In that realm of inherited concepts and rites, there are ever so many things that are the heritage of an earlier and cruder age, things that are repugnant to one's clear-thinking self, run counter to all demonstrated truths of science and observation, and would be unceremoniously rejected by most enlightened men were it not for this mental inertia and fear, or the lack of constructive and consistent thinking.

All of man's faiths, with the sole, possible, exception of the teachings of Confucius, have their creeds, conceived by and imposed upon their successors in coming ages, by men who, while exceeding in deeds of piety towards God and of charity towards their fellow-men, were yet totally ignorant of the laws of the Universe and their workings. They were men to whom the forces of life and death, sickness and well-being, sunshine and rain, heat and cold, the flood of the tides and the changing of the seasons were but *anarchical mysteries*, capable of supernatural interpretation and therefore also of miraculous intervention, to either accelerate or to interrupt their normal action. In a certain sense they still are, of course. We do not know *the origin* of these elements, the cause of their being and their action. But they have ceased to be mysteries *in their constituents* and in *their regulated workings* and manifestations. Yet it were men of that pre-scientific age who imposed such creeds and dogmas on us, and devised certain commensurate rites and ceremonies to be followed faithfully by us as a consequence of their own immature and erroneous conceptions. And yet we, after we have studied the natural sciences, including geology and astronomy, have learned the physiology of the human and animal Kingdoms, still persist in accepting without quibble or thought the dogmatic interpretations of our forebears, and follow the rites and ceremonies, the *embodied symbols* of these misconceptions, prescribed by these men as a result of these notions. We do so simply because we are naturally inert and timid, too lazy to think consistently, unable to follow the thread of our thoughts, afraid of the possible consequence, or both, simply because they have their being in the abstract realm, a realm full of mysteries and forces that are

beyond us, and hence, had better be left alone and not be tampered with by us, poor, insignificant little beings!

Even Socrates, as reported in Plato's *Dialogues*, said: "If one does not believe in these" (the legends popular among the Greeks of his day) and he undertakes, in a mood of provincial wisdom, to interpret each one of them in a Natural manner, *he will need to have much time*. But I have no time for it, and the reason, my friend, is the following. I am not as yet in a position, as the Delphic inscription tells us, to know myself, and it appears ridiculous to me therefore to *inquire into other matters*. Therefore, I leave *these things alone*, and accept the current belief about them."

"A dogma," says Taine, "is nothing in itself; *look at the people who made it*." We have already looked at the people who made it, and found that they belonged to a different age, the pre-scientific age, and hence, wanting in capacity to teach our beliefs. Yet, that outstanding fact does not deter the greater majority of us from unctuously accepting and repeating the creeds taught us by them.

Charles Darwin, on being asked by a certain Bishop whether his theory of evolution and the gradual development of the species through natural selection conflicted in any manner with the Christian belief, replied: "none whatever!"

But then, Darwin was a *naturalist* and *not* a theologian. Had he been half as good a theologian as he was a good naturalist he would have realized that the two could not possibly dwell peacefully together, and that if man had not been constitutionally inert in things abstract, and especially theological things, but had reasoned things out to their logical conclusion, he would soon realize that there was no room in the one heart and one mind for the two. For, Darwinism not only contradicts the story of the Book of Genesis, but drives all dogmatic creeds, and especially the Christian, onto the shoals of doubt, to say the very least. Unless, like the Buddhists, one concedes the possessions of an immortal soul to all one's fellow-creatures on earth, there is no room in it for the belief in the soul and its survival. There is no room in it for Salvation, for Vicarious Atonement, for the Resurrection, for the Hereafter, for Reward and Punishment, for the miraculous birth of a Saviour, as well as the other mainstays of a creed based on an egocentric interpretation of the Universe.

To the primitive mind, ignorant of the laws of nature and life,

a mind to which all phenomena were miracles pure and simple, a few miracles more or less presented no obstacle, and a faith could be made to hang securely on them. But the modern mind, steeped in science, to which all these phenomena have long ceased to be miracles and have become well-defined, and thoroughly understood laws, balks at the acceptance of any miracles as the basis of its philosophy of life, its ethics and behavior after it had thoroughly eliminated the element of miracle from its interpretation of the laws of the Universe and from its own physical and mental life and being.

From the foregoing premises we arrive at still another conclusion, which is as follows. When the spokesmen of the Christian Church, from the beginnings of the teaching of the new natural sciences in the days of Galileo and Bruno down to the days of Darwin, Wallace and Haeckel, were waging war to the finish against the exponents of these sciences, they were, not at all motivated by purely obscurantist bigotry but by the far-deeper and all-embracing instinct of self-preservation and the desire for survival. They thought that the human animal was *logical* and consistent in its thinking, and hence thought to read the doom of the faith entrusted to their keeping in the writings and the theories propounded by these exponents of science. They could not foresee the workings of that counteractory force inherent in and, at work in, the human mind—mental inertia,—which eventually came to their rescue and maintained the *Status quo* to this very day. The Catholic Church, being nothing if not consistent and thorough in its policies, has, however, placed the works of Darwin on the Index of the books forbidden to the faithful.

From dogma we come, of course, to prayer; prayer as a means for influencing the Deity to perform certain deeds resulting in our favor, or to abstain from doing certain others that would harm us. The representatives of the old creeds, with their naive belief in this earth's being the center of the Universe, and man, who lives on it, the central focal point and object of all creation and creatures, as well as the special object of God's solicitude, while all the other visible phenomena were nothing but a series of disjointed and unrelated manifestations, or miracles if you please, experienced no difficulty whatever in asking his God *to deviate a bit* from His beaten path for his sake. But to the modern man this becomes an increasingly difficult process. He has his scientific Cosmological

philosophy, with its minute and well-regulated order of progression. He knows that *order* is the *basis* of life, his own life as of the rest of this infinitely-complex Universe. And prayer appears to him as nothing more than blasphemy pure and simple, as was duly indicated long ago by Spinoza, who described the process of prayer in just that term—blasphemy.