

CIVILIZATION, SCIENCE, AND INSPIRING IDEALS.

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IN AMERICA, we have been told, civilization is only a name and a hollow pretense. There is no real civilization here, and he or she who misses that intangible commodity and longs for it must shake off the dust of America and seek a cultural and spiritual home in Europe. True, civilization is sick in Europe, but not sick unto death, apparently, according to the youthful iconoclastic critics of America. European civilization is bound to recover and blossom like the proverbial rose once more, and weary, disappointed American talent can still find balm and tonic in Paris, London, Rome, Berlin, Madrid, Munich, Moscow.

Yet there are distinguished and progressive Europeans who despair of Europe, think it is dying of mutual hate, malice and moral bankruptcy, and who look wistfully and hopefully toward North America, or toward half-Asiatic Russia, or toward ancient and mysterious China as possible redeemers and healers of afflicted Humanity.

Now, Russia has been emulating and imitating Western Europe for about three hundred years. It is not likely to relapse into Tartar barbarism. Bolshevism is only destructive Marxian Socialism violently adapted to Russian conditions, and its total failure was a foregone conclusion. Given illiteracy, ignorance, peasant isolation, traditions of autocracy and tyranny, and the whole story of the Bolshevik adventure calls for no elaborate explanation. But even in Russia the forces of sanity, construction, liberalism and democracy are certain to prevail in the end, and the process of westernization must eventually be resumed. Russia has valuable elements to contribute to civilization, but they are not elements that the West cannot assimilate and utilize. America is Europe on the

western hemisphere. American civilization is not and cannot be essentially different from that of Europe. America has no religion, or ethical code, or system of law, or form of social and political organization, or literary and artistic ideals that are radically different from European equivalents of those institutions and possessions. As has so truly been said, *America is to Europe what western America is to eastern*. It means open spaces, opportunity, freshness, boldness, experimentation and courageous adventures. But all these advantages do not affect the quintessence of the civilization, of the social and moral heritage of the human race.

After all, what *is* civilization? It is a term that covers a multitude of ideas concerning law, order, industrial relations, political organization, religious and ethical standards, letters and art, education and recreation. In one country—Russia, for example, or Serbia—only a few are truly civilized; in others, a considerable portion of the population, and in still others half, or even more than half, of the citizenry may be considered as civilized. The greatest and hardest task of civilization is to reach and annex the hosts that still walk in the darkness or live a joyless, sub-human, narrow and trivial life, a life of slavery, drudgery and degradation. Civilization is still aristocratic, and some writers have said that when we talk of France, or Germany, for example, as a progressive, civilized, spiritually gifted nation, we have in mind only a few thousand savants, artists, men of letters, educators and statesmen who think and build and invent and adorn France or Germany. This is true, in a sense; but behind the few thousand men and women of genius, exceptional ability and distinction stand larger numbers who can appreciate the former, aid and encourage them in hundreds of ways and recruit their ranks. And behind these, again, are other thousands who are benefited and elevated by the civilization which creates the atmosphere of the society to which they belong.

The deep discontent in America or Europe with civilization, the gloomy warnings and forebodings indulged in by embattled and pseudo-pessimistic persons, are themselves symptoms of civilization. The ills of civilization are indeed serious, but they are not fatal. Civilization is undergoing a crisis, but it is not the first crisis it has muddled through, nor will it be the last. Civilization is sick, but the doctors unfortunately disagree, as they always have, in their diagnosis of the malady and in their methods of treatment.

What ails world civilization—or, rather, Western civilization?

The true answer is this: It has lost its ideals, inspiration, *raison d'être*. It has lost faith in itself. Men and women today are as capable of service, of self-sacrifice, of persistent and faithful work as they ever were; but incentives and motives are lacking in many. Pessimism, cynicism, skepticism, "rebellion" have supplanted hope, courage, loyalty and idealism. If humanity—runs the argument—is doomed to extinction; if the little planet that is our habitat must share the fate of the moon, or other dead worlds; if personal immortality, moreover, is an illusion, as science is inclined to hold; if human evolution must reach a limit and stop, and then be followed by retrogression and dissolution under inexorable physical changes—advancing ice and diminishing supplies of food, for example—then why should we concern and trouble ourselves with questions of progress? Why not eat, drink and be merry, since tomorrow the earth and its inhabitants must die?

Now, candidly and sincerely, what answer can we make to this line of argument?

Prof. Ralph Barton Perry, in his work—more critical than constructive—on *Present Philosophical Tendencies* writes:

"To pretend to speak for the universe in terms of the narrow and abstract predictions of astronomy is to betray a bias of mind that is little less provincial and unimaginative than the most naive anthropomorphism. What the residual cosmos which looms beyond the border of knowledge shall in time bring forth, no man that has yet been born can say. That it may overbalance and remake the little world of things known, and falsify every present prophecy, no man can doubt. It is as consistent with religious thought to greet it as a promise of salvation as to dread it as a portent of doom."

To the writer, it must be confessed, this reasoning seems most lame, inadequate and unsatisfactory. It will not impress bewildered men and women, whether young or old, who demand as much science in their religious and ethical faiths as they demand spiritual and inspiring truth from their science. Astronomy may be narrow or thin, as Prof. Perry says it is, but he offers no alternative that is not much, much thinner and more dubious. Moreover, astronomy is not the only science which warns humanity of its doom. What does geology have to say about the past and future of life on this tiny planet, and what inferences can we properly draw from biology, anthropology, geography, history? One cannot build faith on the mere possibility of a message of hope and cheer from "the residual cosmos."

No; Prof. Perry's answer will not do. The true answer is psychological. As a matter of fact, no living person is in the least swayed, affected, influenced by thoughts regarding the remote past or the remote future. The fact that the earth may die a million years hence, or several millions years hence, leaves us absolutely cold and indifferent. No emotional reaction of any sort follows the most categorical affirmation of that proposition. If one is good, the affirmation cannot make him bad; if one is bad, it will not make him good—or worse.

We are so constituted that we must live in the present—for our ideas and sentiments concerning the future *are part of ourselves and of the present*. Our life in the present is not limited—the gods be thanked!—to physical pleasures and pains. We do not live by bread-and-circus alone. We have our appetites, “lower passions”—as we significantly call them—and our petty, if legitimate, interests. But we also have interests, emotions, impulses, longings, passions of a nobler sort. We have general ideas and principles. We have visions and glimpses of beauty and harmony. We have a sense of sin, of unworthiness, of failure that drives us to seek and slowly realize our better selves. Who will assert that the life of the intellect and the finer and purer emotions is not fully as important as, if not more important than, the life of the body, and that even with the average man? So far as the superior elements of humanity are concerned, it is scarcely necessary to point out that they have always unhesitatingly sacrificed material interest and pleasures to the things of the spirit. They have always been willing to give up liberty, ease, reputation and life for the sake of what they believed to be true, beautiful and good. Men and women have died and suffered in prisons, exile, torture because they loved justice, freedom, equality, brotherhood.

What, we may well ask the pessimists and skeptics, is the significance of these facts—facts of which history is full?

To say, as some do, that martyrs and idealists and reformers are victims of delusions, or that their sacrifices have been and are vain and irrational, is not to meet the issue involved. Let us grant the contention for the sake of the argument; what follows? Only, that the martyrs and sufferers make grave mistakes of the mind—of the mind, not of the heart. The quality of the act is not affected. The importance of ideas, of the things of the spirit in a moral and emotional sense, is not disproved. Illusions and dreams for which men and women will suffer and die are certainly abundantly real to them!

But the admission just made provisionally need not be made at all. It is not true that the martyrs and other self-sacrificing innovators are deluded fools, dupes of dogma and superstition. It is not true that suffering, self-denial and sacrifice in behalf of ideals and principles are vain and fruitless.

The blood of the martyrs, it has been said, is the seed of the Church. That is incontestably true. All radical movements and all vital reforms are advanced by the sacrifices of the pioneers and founders. Example has not lost its potency, nor brave, unselfish deed its spell and inspiration. Words are deeds, says the poet, and deeds, we may add, are telling arguments.

We hear much just now about the gross materialism and the anarchical attitude of the young. The more intelligent and educated the young are, we are told, the less respect or patience do they manifest toward social and ethical ideals. Excitement, amusement, fun and success alone have any appeal to the college boys and girls of today, we are assured. Is this true? Not all the college presidents, professors and instructors think so. Here is what Prof. Stuart P. Sherman says on the point in a recent review article:

"The deepest craving of these average [college] young men and women is not to be unbound and released, and to be given a license for a free and spontaneous doing as they pleased in all directions. They recognize that nature and environment and lax educational discipline have made them beings of sufficiently uncoordinated desires and scattering activities. What they deeply crave is a binding generalization of philosophy, or religion, or morals, which will give direction and purpose, which will give channel and speed, to the languid diffusive drift of their lives. The suppressed desire which causes their unhappiness is a suppressed desire for a good life. . . . What human nature craves is something good and great one can do with heart and mind and body."

Similar opinions have been expressed by other noted educators, and the present writer, who has had considerable teaching experience, is able to indorse those hopeful and heartening opinions.

However, the question remains, *What ideals and guiding, inspiring ideas can we sincerely and whole-heartedly commend and offer to the young?* To repeat, what we offer must be scientific, reasonable, philosophical. Pseudo-ideas and empty formulæ will no longer suffice. Talk about the alleged pragmatic "will to believe" sounds more hollow than ever. Save in a few instances, the emotional nature will not find satisfaction and solace in so-called "truths"

which the intellect rejects as wholly arbitrary and baseless. Assertions concerning the unseen and unknown will not be accepted without scientific evidence of the authenticity of any alleged revelation, and this is merely one illustration of many one might give in support of the inescapable necessity of firm, genuinely scientific foundations of any belief whatever that is demanded of us.

It is impossible to agree with Dr. Charles P. Steinmetz, the eminent electrical engineer, who asserts that "there can be no scientific foundation for religion, but belief must always remain the foundation for religion," because "science is logical reasoning from facts, that is, sense perceptions," while religion deals with the infinite, the unknowable, etc., and that, in connection with the old controversy between science and religion all that "we can say is that the two are not necessarily incompatible, but are different and unrelated activities of the human mind." There are several fallacies in this far from novel conclusion, fallacies that die hard.

In the first place, if belief must always be the foundation of religion, the question follows, *belief in what?* If we cannot use science in the search for religious truth, what means have we for distinguishing between fact and fancy, fable or imposture in the religious realm? Must we believe anyone who advances the pretensions of a prophet, a savior, a messenger of God? If not, and if we may and must test religious claims and pretensions, is not the testing *scientific?*

In the second place, assuming that we conclude, in accordance with scientific methods and criteria, that a certain message *is* divine—a revelation to the finite mind as to the infinite and unknowable—there remains the task of interpreting the message and rejecting interpolations, perversions, mistranslations, and the like. How can we accomplish this task without science? And surely the exact meaning of a message can only be determined scientifically!

Finally, if religion is a distinct and non-scientific activity of the mind, how can we follow the operations of the mind in that activity and be certain that they are normal? Science, and science only, enables us to ascertain our own or others' sanity and reject hallucinations and illusions.

No; there is nothing in Dr. Steinmetz's argument. If religion is not and cannot be justified by facts and logical reasoning, it cannot be justified at all, and "religious truth" becomes a meaningless phrase. It is astonishing how many supposedly intelligent and well-read persons use words and propositions that are empty and mean-

ingless! Dr. Steinmetz's alleged vindication of religion, welcomed so warmly by the orthodox, is in reality a rejection of religion.

Applying this qualification to the issue we have been considering,—namely, the kind, character and credentials of the ideals and ideas that will stand the keenest analysis and survive the most merciless skeptical attack,—what can we candidly affirm?

In passing, and before answering, it may be well to animadvert on the extraordinary notion, prevalent among the shallow, half-baked writers, that Psychoanalysis has somehow revealed alarming traits and potentialities in human nature, and thus delivered a deadly blow at the whole conception of human progress. Whatever else Psychoanalysis may have done, or failed to do, it has certainly thrown no new light on normal human nature. History, the actual record of human achievements, human trials and errors, is an infinitely safe and better guide to rational conclusions respecting human nature than the complex of theories, guesses and paradoxes associated with Freud and his school. We know what humanity has done and can do. We know what the course of evolution has been in politics, industry, trade and social relations. Whatever may lurk in the "Unconscious," the family, the Community, the Arts and Sciences, the great ethical and social movements are *facts*. They could not exist if humanity were hopelessly depraved and sinful, if virtue and wholesome self-restraint and character were sheer fictions. Our hopes and expectations of future progress are based on the facts and net results recorded in institutions, standards, accepted principles and observed human behavior. The psychoanalyst, in his clinic, may explain individual aberrations; he cannot, and is not called upon, to explain average conscience and intelligence in action.

We can confidently and scientifically affirm several propositions.—namely:

That no happiness, contentment or serenity can possibly be found by normal persons in a narrow, selfish, crudely and grossly materialistic existence;

That man does not live by "wine, woman and song" alone, and that his intellect and emotional nature make demands upon him which can be satisfied only by devotion to truth, beauty, nobility and righteousness;

That Altruism is just as "natural," primordial and essential to human life as enlightened Egoism; and, finally,

That, in the words of that acute thinker, observer and creative artist, Joseph Conrad, it is not necessary to believe that the world is good and harmonious, but only that it can be made so by human effort.

Compared with certain theological and metaphysical creeds, the foregoing brief and simple set of propositions may seem meager, prosaic and disappointing. But scientific and philosophical thought cannot, at present, offer richer and more abundant material for a new heaven and a new earth. However, what is given *is enough for the needs and purposes of the most advanced among us*. On the foregoing propositions a new and worthy way of Life can be founded. Justice, equal opportunity, liberty, co-operation and human brotherhood, national and international, cultivation of science, philosophy and beauty—these values can all be derived and their validity and reality deduced from those few and simple propositions.

If the world is full of strife, wrong, injustice, malice and cruelty, the explanation of the deplorable fact is to be found not in lack of intelligence or good will in humanity, but in the comparative immaturity of man and the vicissitudes he has encountered in his upward march since the dawn of civilization. Man has had to adapt himself to a changing environment. He has had to fight and conquer "nature." He has had to learn the advantages of work and co-operation. He has had to explore the earth and learn to know its inhabitants. He has had to overcome the antipathies and prejudices generated by ignorance, fear and distrust.

At last, though by no means fully emancipated, man is ready, or making ready, to face the problems of social and economic organization, to ponder the question whether the world can really be made safe for free, rational, civilized human beings. Can war be abolished? Can poverty be eliminated? Can the great mass of humanity be lifted to a rational, dignified, human plane of existence? Can vulgarity, vice, ignorance and coarseness be successfully combated, and good taste, clean living, culture and love of beauty widely diffused? These are the questions that interest and challenge the thoughtful and earnest men and women of today, and, if each of them can be answered honestly in the affirmative, then we *have* ideals that are scientific, philosophical and worth living, working and striving for.

We certainly have every right to answer those questions in the affirmative. We have the assets of intellect and good will wherewith

we can, if we choose, conquer evil and replace it with good. We can assure the young that there is joy and inspiration in working and living for the ideal sketched above. We can assure them that the problems posited by the ideal are solvable, and that each of us can contribute something to the right solution. History supports such assurances, and individual and social psychology alike confirm them.

Whatever one's theological, religious, metaphysical views may be; whatever one's conceptions regarding personal immortality, for example, or the relation of the individual to the whole cosmos, the ideal just sketched cannot fail to appeal to him as being calculated to give meaning, worth and nobility to human life. Christians, Buddhists, Confucians, Agnostics, Mohammedans, Atheists, Monotheists, Pantheists—all men and women, in short, who have emerged from brutish forms of barbarism and stopped to reflect on life, duty, contentment, inward peace can find in the modest service we have been considering inspiration, stimulation, refreshment and satisfaction of the insistent demand of their own natures for expression and fulfilment. What more is there to ask or expect of this life?