

RELIGION ALWAYS COMES BACK

BY WILLIAM H. ROBERTS

AMERICA at last is class-conscious!

Not, we must add at once, in an economic or Marxian sense. The most strenuous efforts of such doughty fighters as Debs, LaFollette, Upton Sinclair, and Norman Thomas, if we may judge by the results of the last election, have failed even to attract serious attention. The division is along other lines. It is a division and a conflict that could scarcely have been predicted twenty years ago.

What the Socialists have failed to accomplish, the Fundamentalists have achieved! Socialism in America seems distinctly on the ebb. Religion, on the other hand, is steadily assuming greater and greater social and political significance. Its influence on the recent presidential election cannot be ignored and should not be discounted. The success of the Prohibition movement made the Protestant religious elements of our population conscious as never before of their political power. What shall we do next, was a natural question. Resulting conflicts deepened the fissures of cleavage and consolidated the opposing factions.

In a democratic country no good reason can be assigned why any group whatever should not utilize all the political force it can command. That which the churches can summon is enormous. Organization and a technique of propaganda are being rapidly perfected. Religion is in politics. It is in to stay. And its influence seems bound to increase.

What new issues will be raised? What changes will result? It is impossible yet to foresee. In the meantime Prohibition, surveys of industry by the churches, "monkey laws," programs and agitation for week-day religious instruction, the activities of "The Lord's Day Alliance" and the American Association for the Advancement

of Atheism—all these are facts big with menace or promise, or merely interest, according to one's point of view.

A glance at publishers' statistics tends to confirm our estimate of the place held by religion in the thought of America today. In 1928 it is reported that 7,614 new books were published. Of these 1,135 were fiction, 766 dealt with religion, and 634 were juveniles. These three classes contain one-third of the entire output and the works on religion more than one-tenth.¹

It is scarcely possible to pick up an issue of a magazine more serious than the "confession" type without finding at least one article expounding, attacking, defending, or attempting to appraise religion. Newspapers are on the alert to feature dissensions and doctrinal controversies. The American Association for the Advancement of Atheism is an active missionary society for pious irreligion. Dr. Watson preaches the gospel of Behaviorism with the fanaticism and the tactics of Billy Sunday. And Clarence Darrow argues for evolution as he would for a crook or a murderer.² Scientists, meanwhile, are on the defensive and inclined to be conciliatory or even friendly. Millikan reiterates his conviction that religion and science are not merely compatible but mutually supplementary and both indispensable. Eddington, in what may be reckoned the most important scientific or philosophical or religious book of recent years (*The Nature of the Physical World*) finds science literally driving men's thought toward essentially religious conceptions.

The exciting possibility emerges that questions of faith and belief may again, and before very long, become the supreme concern of men and of nations. Religious wars, we certainly hope, are forever past: but that seems by no means sure. If they come again, they will at least restore something of color and glamor to a world that is rapidly losing its sense of spiritual values in a mad, and apparently futile, struggle to keep pace with its machines.

Religious wars cannot possibly be more cruel or more devastating than economic wars. On the contrary, if, as has been confidently

¹ Other items are: biographies, 640; poetry and drama, 595; sociology and economics, 502; history, 394; general literature, 363; geography and science, 685. (Willard E. Hawkins in *The Author and Journalist*, March, 1929, p. 9, quoting the Publishers' Weekly.)

² Why, by the way, has no one ever protested that science does not require a criminal lawyer to defend it? And why has no one pointed out the stupid tactical blunders, the complete misjudgment of all the significant factors in the situation, that made the self-elected defenders of science the really simian figures in the famous Scopes trial?

asserted, gentlemen really prefer wars and will have them, a religious war would seem to be the best of all possible wars. Eight or nine centuries ago men fought for a Holy Land. Today they fight only for oil lands—or perhaps diamond fields. To call that *progress* is ironical.

If men must fight, religion is the one thing most worth fighting for. If men must again train cannon and high explosive shells upon the bodies of living fellow men, let us pray to whatever gods there be that they will do it for the glory of some God or other, or for the salvation of whatever may then be serving as the equivalent of immortal souls. It will be an immeasurable calamity, if they are willing to do it for the salvation of the Maximum Petrolatum Company's investments in the Andes or for the glory (and profit) of the international bankers, Messrs. Judas and Hogg.

But just what should we fight about? Of all stupid procedures, the silliest is to *fight* for truth. Truth is not disseminated in clouds of poison gas. It is not thrust home by stabbing bayonets. Violence is a sign of panic, not of certainty and assurance. What is religion? How can it become anyone's supreme concern? And what is the secret of its vitality?

It is commonly held that religion cannot be defined. I believe it can be adequately, even completely defined in eight words.

Religion is the goodness of the good man.

More than eight words will be required to explain the definition. We must, in the first place, come to agreement upon our "good man." I do *not* mean the morally irreproachable citizen. He *may* be that, too. He is more likely to be an object of suspicion to good citizens. He is that sturdy, indomitable person, quite possibly a "rough neck," who according to a popular saying cannot be "kept down." He just won't stay down. Beaten, deceived, disappointed, failing times without number, he comes back again and again and as often as need be. Smiling or grim, he carries on. Destiny weakens before such a man. Circumstances "break" at last in his favor. In the end he wins. And in his triumph he is more than a mere man. He is a symbol of M A N toiling through the ages.

By his "goodness" I mean whatever it may be that keeps him going. We may call it energy, determination, will-power, or other names. I prefer to call it goodness. If we analyze it, we may be able to discern "fighting reflexes" "conditioned" to opposition and

difficulty as stimuli. We may describe in detail emotional elements—visceral disturbances and their attendant sensation-complexes. But that with which I am concerned just now is an “intellectual” element. It can scarcely be called a judgment, or even a theory. It is rather a belief, or an assumption. It may not always be fully conscious, or verbalised; yet it is always present as the foundation of every intelligent or purposeful effort.

The “good man” could not be “good” at all, in the very special sense in which we are now using the term, if he did not assume in his environment a *goodness* answering to and supplementing his own. No one can pull at an imaginary rope. We cannot push at an imaginary obstacle. We cannot walk except on some firm support. We live, we move, we undertake, and we succeed in our undertakings, only because the world at once resists and cooperates with us. The “good man” discerns, however dimly or confusedly, the cooperation in the resistance. That is *faith*.

This is not faith in his own powers alone. That would be nonsense. If the environment were utter chaos; if no effort or forethought of his could possibly bring to realization any of his desires; his effort would be paralyzed by a sense of its own futility. Indeed, he would not so much as know what effort is. Desire itself could never arise. He would be incapable of anything but blindly reflex actions and such a vague mass of feeling as we may attribute in imagination to an oyster.

To act otherwise than reflexly is *possible* only in an ordered environment. And whenever intelligent or purposeful behavior appears, it evinces a *trust in things*. To the extent to which this trust is not merely occasional but characteristic, and is directed not simply to this or that particular situation but to life as a whole and to the environment in its totality—to the Universe—it is religion.

Religion, then, is *trust in a cosmic goodness*. If we turn from our “good man” to that of which he is the symbol, religion is M A N ’S attitude toward his environment—let us say, the Universe—when M A N confronts its vastness and mystery with hope and aspiration.

Every discovery of science is a vindication of religion, *if* this definition can be made good. Every achievement of civilization can be traced to a faith that is essentially religious. Not one high human enterprise can possibly be carried to successful completion severed from its roots in religion.

It is no longer an exasperating mystery that religion, "exposed," "refuted," outlawed, banished, makes its way slyly or in open triumph back into the hearts of men. To outlaw it is to outlaw one's very self. To be irreligious is simply to be sub-human. To abandon religion is to surrender hope and high emprise. It is to relinquish all dreams of happiness and lasting satisfaction, to turn from energetic, eager labor to dejection, apathy, and despair.

Our definition must be either very original, very profound, or very foolish. For it is evident that most men do not believe that religion is anything so simple, so fundamental, so vital, so ineradicable, or so indispensable. If they did, they would not be forever attacking or defending it. Only a few hard-bitten, desperate souls, hopelessly at odds with life, would disavow it. They would find no listeners.

The rest of us would feel no interest in the controversy. We should see that all the particular religious beliefs and practices are only symbols of something that is very different—something very simple and very profound. Without dismay we should watch the great symbols glow and fade, knowing that they are only flames flung up from the central fires of human energy and aspiration. Until the fires grow cold, new flames will ever leap up to replace those that die away and to illumine the field of our endeavors.

Religion, then, is the *elan* of the human race. Trust in a cosmic goodness is the common and unifying element in all the particular religions. Even those that seem the most absurd or hideous are but variations upon this theme. Dogmas are attempts to define, to explain, and to defend men's hopes. Rites and ceremonies are the struggles of faith to realize and lay hold on the mercy that, it is felt, must underlie the rugged and apparently hostile facts of life.

An awed sense of *the explosiveness of things* is about all that can be discerned in the lowest forms of religion. A mysterious power, often called *mana*, is believed to pervade everything. The most trifling object, the simplest act, may be attended by appalling consequences. One who can learn the laws by which events happen can control them and bend them to his purposes. So he can insure rich harvests, plentiful supplies of game or fish, victory in war—in a word, whatever seems to men good.

The point is that there *are* laws and that men *can* achieve well-being. That faith is religion. The environment is not hopelessly

capricious nor invincibly hostile. Man is not utterly helpless or alone.

The first guesses, the first attempts to control events, are of course in the light of later knowledge grotesque. Strange incantations and rituals develop. Soon they lose their character as scientific experiments. They congeal into superstitions. Progress is halted until they can be shattered and men will experiment anew with wider knowledge and improved methods.

Religion, however, must not be confused with any of its merely incidental features or its temporary expressions. It is neither incantation nor ritual, nor both together. These are but conjectured ways to happiness. Religion is not a way at all, but the confidence that there is a way.

The distinction is both real and important. The first ways are certainly nearly all wrong. If religion were merely a collection of devices to control the weather, multiply possessions, or vanquish enemies, it would collapse when the particular devices are discovered to be futile. Were men limited to their first conjectures, they would soon sink into inertia and despair. Actually we see that religion survives one disillusionment after another; and man rises from each disappointment still believing that a promised land lies just ahead. Religion is at once the energy that drives him, the hope that beckons him on, and the faith that runs before achievement.

At a higher cultural level, spirits and gods appear. Varied as are their forms, they are all embodiments of hopes. They are beings from whom men may purchase or entreat favors. The Roman poet Lucretius was wrong when he wrote his famous line, "Fear made the first gods." And Rabbi Lewis Browne is wrong again, when he accounts for all religion by the simple formula, "Men were afraid."

Fear, the psychologist knows, is a profound and extensive organic disturbance. Fear alone produces *nothing* but panic. If men do not act merely frantically in terrifying situations, it is because something other than fear controls them. If panic turns to religion, it is because there is present at least a gleam of hope and a measure of sanity. Religion is not fear but the attempt to master it.

No man, civilized or savage, ever prayed to a being of whom he was only afraid. If he prays or sacrifices, it is because he hopes. An American chauffeur does not pray to his automobile, because he

knows it is no use. A Hindu may. He thinks there is at least a chance. A man may believe, with good reason, that the deity in control of his destiny is ferocious. This is not religion, until it occurs to him that the god may be appeased. Divine favor may be won. At least the worst of the divine anger may be averted. So the most horrible of idols, the most atrocious and cruel rites, bear testimony to man's irrepressible hope that things are at least not quite so bad as they seem.

From the supreme horror savage man was probably free. It seems never to have occurred to him that his cries would win *no* answer, that there was no meaning at all to nature, no goodness anywhere in the vast universe responsive to his own. To feel the anguish of that discovery, if it be a discovery, is one outstanding characteristic of our own culture. "We have seen the spring sun shine out of an empty heaven to light up a soulless earth; we have felt with utter loneliness that the Great Companion is dead."³

However we extend our survey, we shall always find that religion is a faith in a cosmic goodness. It is a faith sometimes tremulous and uncertain, sometimes stalwart and assured. Whether the one or the other, it is ineradicable and indispensable. If particular formulas prove inadequate, it will devise new ones. The only alternative to it is apathy and inertia.

But religion is not alone hope. There would be no ground for hope unless in some way, and in spite of appearances, the Universe were *already* good. So religion is hope *and* appreciation. It is trust illuminated by the vision of goodness already present. For Christians all this is symbolized in The Heavenly Father.

What controversies we should be spared, if we could only realize the functions and the limitations of a symbol! A symbol is of value because it at once resembles and does not resemble the object for which it stands. We call Lindbergh "The Lone Eagle." It is a splendid metaphor. But it is splendid just because Lindbergh is *not* an eagle. If he were, we would shut him up in a zoo. When Chris-

³ Clifford: "The Influence Upon Morality of a Decline in Religious Beliefs," in *Lectures and Essays*, Vol. II, p. 250. Cf. also Theodore Dreiser. "I can make no comment on my work or my life that holds either interest or significance for me. . . . Life is to me too much a welter and play of inscrutable forces to permit, in my case at least, any significant comment. . . . In short I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed." (Quoted in "The New Student," April, 1929, p. 9, from *The Bookman*.)

tians speak of the Great Power that is the Ultimate Basis of All as "God the Father," they do *not* mean that He must have hot water every morning for His shave. What *do* they mean? What is it that is symbolized?

Stripped of all metaphors, the Christian faith is that, if men will confront the Universe not with fear and hostility but with love, reverence, and a will to cooperate, things will "break well" for them. If they will talk with I T, as loving children would with an ideal father, they will receive "answers"—insights, peace, and happiness. Time may bring health, success, and obvious pleasure. It may bring sickness, failure, and seeming misery. Whatever comes, in the depths of man's being, it will be well. It will be "well with his soul." Even death can be only another triumph for life that is consciously in touch with the Energy of the Universe.

Him or I T? Nature or God? Universe or Heavenly Father? It is almost evidence of a cosmic irony that men should engage in bitter controversy over these terms and contend for one or another of them, when they all mean so nearly the same thing. There is not the least difference in meaning, so long as we are concerned only with the present facts and their causes. Of the great Power or Principle that serves for the last term in our thinking, we know only one thing. I T has given us the kind of a world we have. I T is revealed in the world which I T has made. Our thought moves, and must move, in a circle. From known facts we infer a Cause. But of the Cause we know only that it has produced the facts. What name we shall apply to I T is a matter for individual tastes? Mumbo Jumbo would do as well as Zeus, if by Mumbo Jumbo we *mean* the same.

Man's hope, though, is a *new* fact. When man hopes, he reckons not merely with the world he knows but with the world he doesn't know—even with the world that isn't yet. And the hopeful man does not seek an escape to a world of dreams. He grapples with realities and transforms them. He builds cities where there were only jungles or deserts. He carves rocks into statues. He extends the span of his life and postpones till its very end the infirmities of old age.

But to struggle, he must find firm foothold. And this is just what blind force, matter, energy, or even "Nature" cannot afford. It is impossible to discern in them the goodness which must supplement and cooperate with man's own.

A cosmic goodness must be defined in other terms. It cannot be derived in any way from that which is not good—from "dirt going it blind" (to use an expressive phrase of Dr. Fosdick's). What religion means by an "Infinite Spirit" or an "Almighty Father" is a goodness at the heart of things. Probably it can never be proved either inductively or deductively. But it must be assumed, if human effort is not to collapse in one vast despair. In "God the Father Almighty," as Christianity has given meaning to the terms, men register the highest and most exuberant—it may be the wildest and most extravagant—of their hopes.

"God" is as bad as "blind force," if He has given us no better a world than "blind force" would have produced. "Nature" is as good as "God," if it is to "Nature" that we owe the poets, the heroes, and the saints of our race, and if we can trust "Nature" to satisfy our craving for a life that is truly good. Indeed "Nature," if it is all that, is obviously only another name (I think a very inferior one) for "God." If "Nature" has given the world Jesus Christ—"Nature," for any Christian, is "God" enough.

Can the cosmic goodness ever be conclusively proved or disproved? It seems scarcely possible. To achieve this, we should have to know all the facts of the Universe and interpret their relations without error. That at best is a remote possibility. In the meantime we must live. Life demands adventure. We venture upon either our hopes or our misgivings.

Today is a strange time for despair. To be sure, it is apparent that the religions of the past pictured the cosmic goodness in too simple a fashion. We can no longer believe, for example, in a divine errand boy executing the orders that we call our prayers. Our universe is vaster, in many ways sterner, than our ancestors supposed. And yet today we understand, as we have never understood before, how "Nature" serves, or at least can be made to serve, man's purposes—even those that are subtlest and most spiritual.

We know that the sun's light was stored in forests that were later buried deep in the earth. So coal was prepared—a storage battery surpassing any that man has yet invented. In deep mines Power lay hid, to be released when men had learned the secret of its use. Water and fire are yoked together to transport him in safety and with amazing speed over vast distances. Even the air sustains

his flight. The lightning has made of his speech "winged words" in a sense of which Homer never dreamed. Physical health, for individuals or for communities, is no longer a matter of chance. Psychology seems to be at least on the threshold of knowledge that will transform life in its most inward aspects. What greater goodness could Omniscience and Omnipotence devise than a world in which there is no limit to what intelligent effort may achieve?

Have we been speaking of material progress only? Is all that we have mentioned something entirely apart from religion? It depends upon the use to which men put the goodness of the Universe. Words that fly to the most secluded corners of the earth may carry only orders to buy or sell; or they may bear messages of light and inspiration. Speeding planes and leviathans of the air may carry poison gases and promoters of frauds; or they may transport works of art and the apostles of new and grander faiths.

In all this there is surely the stimulus to grander hopes and higher emprise than man has hitherto dared to contemplate. A more wonderful world than he has ever before even imagined calls for his admiration and challenges his spirit. To hope, to adore, to dare, is religion at its highest: and never before have there been such splendor to adore, such grounds for hope, or such adventures to undertake. The situation calls not for retreat but for advance. If our age fails to make the advance, the failure may well prove the supreme calamity of history. The disaster, if it comes, will have about it a strange and tragic irony—as when a victorious army flees in panic from its beaten and routed foe.