

THE LAW OF REGRESSION IN RELIGION AND MORALS

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ONE of the principles definitely established in biology is that known as "the law of filial regression." A better formula is, "the tendency to mediocrity." Sir Francis Galton, a pioneer in the statistical study of inheritance, demonstrated that extreme or exceptional peculiarities in parents became less and less exceptional in their offspring. In the words of Galton, "the stature of adult offspring must on the whole be more mediocre than the stature of their parents—that is to say, more near to the mean or mid of the general population." Intellectually and morally, Galton was convinced, as other biologists have been and are, we fare no better. In Galton's words, again, "the more bountifully a parent is gifted by nature, the more rare will be his good fortune if he begets a son who is as richly endowed as himself." The tendency throughout nature, indeed, *is to revert to the mean and to eliminate the abnormal or super-normal.*

These facts are clearly quite as important to sociology and to scientific or philosophical reform movements as they are to biology. If there is a tendency to mediocrity in nature, social and moral relations can not escape the same fate. Society is not an organism in the strict sense of the term, but it is an organic entity nevertheless for all essential social purposes. Great seers and leaders, founders of religions, schools, parties, systems of government have spiritual offspring—disciples, interpreters, enthusiastic propagandists. The law of filial regression seems to apply to the spiritual sons and daughters of genius or of truly remarkable ability.

History, we shall see, is full of illustration of this tendency to revert to the mean and the ordinary. Some of the illustrations seem tragic, and therefore strained, improbable explanations of them have been advanced by minds otherwise acute and powerful. Ah, what progress humanity would have made had it been able to preserve and even improve upon the exceptional moral and spiritual

gifts of its prophets, its supermen, its heroes and martyrs! But, alas, the rare exceptions and the peculiarities, no matter how valuable and beneficent they may be, are obliterated by the universal tendency to mediocrity. The children of the moral giant are "shorter" than the spiritual parent, and their children are apt to be still shorter. The noble and lofty teachings and examples of the parent are either forgotten, or misinterpreted, or honored only by lip service. Practice and conduct undergo little change, or else the change that does take place under the inspiring, influential leadership of the genius, like a revivalist's conversion of a multitude, gradually fades and melts into conduct hardly distinguishable from that of the pre-conversion period.

But the thoughtful and open-minded student of history and of social psychology is not at all astonished, or disheartened, by these facts. They are seen to be natural and inevitable. Only, not even reflective students always draw the right moral from them.

Mr. H. G. Wells, for example, in his extraordinarily vivid and fascinating *Outline of History*, in discussing the early corruption and misconception of Buddhism, says:

"There seems to be no limit to the lies that honest but stupid disciples will tell for the glory of their master and for what they regard as the success of their propaganda. Men who would scorn to tell a lie in everyday life will become unscrupulous cheats and liars when they have given themselves up to propagandist works; it is one of the perplexing absurdities of our human nature."

Here we have a most sweeping generalization—namely, that religious and ethical systems tend to corruption because the zeal of the propagandists who flock to the master's standard leads them, or many of them, to invent lies and vulgar marvels for the purpose of arousing the interest and gripping the imagination of the indifferent, the unintelligent and the superstitious. To this generalization two objections may be raised. In the first place, few of the mendacious disciple-propagandists lie *deliberately and consciously*. They undoubtedly half believe their own inventions. They exaggerate spontaneously, they "romance," as children do, or even adults when carried away by any cause whatever, personal, class or social; and subsequently they are humanly ashamed to retract the half true or extravagant statements impulsively made by them. The capacity for self-deception, for self-exculpation, is known to psychologists and common-sense observers of human behavior, and these are not as

ready as Mr. Wells to call enthusiasts and rhetoricians "cheats and liars." Care and precision, literal and rigorous truth in human speech, and especially in eager, excited speech, are rare and difficult virtues, seldom achieved even by men of science, especially in their ordinary conversations and their offhand, unguarded utterances.

The second objection to Mr. Wells' severe indictment of human nature in disciples and apostles is more important even than the first. Grant for the sake of the argument that the disciples too willingly become "cheats and liars" for the glory of their revered master, whose message they are so anxious to disseminate that they lose consciousness of their own initial violation of its spirit and even of its letter. What does this fact prove? That the disciples, who are of the people and intimately acquainted with their proclivities and mental habits, find it necessary to cheat and lie *in order to render the master's message acceptable*. The disciples seek to make converts, and do not hesitate, by the hypothesis, to stoop to conquer. Otherwise, their voices would be voices crying in a wilderness. The process of popularization, of corruption, of attenuation, of sugar-coating, which the disciples set in motion, even in the lifetime of the master, continues afterward with ever increasing momentum. In the course of a comparatively short period the master's original and revolutionary teachings become conventionalized, hardly distinguishable from the old, unsound creed they were intended to discredit and overthrow. Can we complain that the disciples lack the faith, the courage, the vision, the single-mindedness of the master? This would be irrational and futile. To repeat, moral genius, like intellectual, is rare. It is foredoomed to misconstruction and perversion. It is foredoomed by the law of regression or the tendency to the mean.

Let us go to history for some striking illustrations of this tendency. The rise, growth and decline of great religious systems might be expected, a priori, to supply them, and in fact they do.

Take Buddhism first. Mr. H. G. Wells, in his "Outline"—a compilation based on standard works and authorities—writes as follows concerning the fundamental teaching of Gautama:

"All the miseries and discontents of life he traces to insatiable selfishness. Suffering, he teaches, is due to the craving individuality, to the torment of greedy desire. Until a man has overcome every sort of personal craving his life is trouble and his end sorrow. There are three principal forms the craving of life takes, and all

are evil. The first is the desire to gratify the senses, sensuousness. The second is the desire for personal immortality. The third is the desire for prosperity, worldliness. All these must be overcome—that is to say, a man must no longer be living for himself—before life can become serene. But when they are indeed overcome and no longer rule a man's life, when the first personal pronoun has vanished from his private thoughts, then he has reached the higher wisdom, Nirvana, serenity of soul."

Gautama's Rule of Life, or Eightfold Path to wisdom and serenity, is this: right views; right aspirations; right speech; right conduct; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right rapture.

Gautama's religion, Mr. Wells truly observes, was primarily a religion of conduct, not a religion of observances and sacrifices. It had no temples, no priestly order, no sacrifices, and no theology. The gods worshipped in India in Gautama's time were completely ignored—passed by.

What happened to Gautama's teaching, to primitive Buddhism? Let Mr. Wells answer:

"It was early the fate of Gautama . . . to be made into a wonder by his less intelligent disciples in their efforts to impress the outer world. We have already noted how one devout follower could not but believe that the moment of the master's mental irradiation must necessarily have been marked by an epileptic fit of the elements. This is one small sample of the vast accumulation of vulgar marvels that presently sprang up about the memory of Buddha. . . .

"Honest souls, for most of them were indubitably honest, were presently telling their hearers of the miracles that attended the Buddha's birth—of his youthful feats of strength, of the marvels of his everyday life, winding up with a sort of illumination of his body at the moment of death. Of course it was impossible to believe that Buddha was the son of a mortal father. He was miraculously conceived through his mother dreaming of a beautiful white elephant. . .

"Moreover, a theology grew up about Buddha. He was discovered to be a god. He was one of a series of divine beings, the Buddhas. 'Under the overpowering influence of these sickly imaginations the moral teachings of Gautama have been almost hid from view. The theories grew and flourished; each new step, each new hypothesis, demanded another, until the whole sky was filled with forgeries of the brain, and the nobler and simpler lessons of the

founder of the religion were smothered beneath the glittering mass of metaphysical subtleties' (Rhys Davids' "Buddhism")."

Many of the disciples, misconceiving the idea of renunciation, lapsed into monasticism, a lapse particularly easy in the climate of India. Then Buddhism gained wealth and power; simple huts were giving place to substantial structures, decorated and adorned. Early Buddhist art was strongly Greek in character, and the cult and doctrine of Gautama soon gathered corruptions and variations from Brahminism and Hellenism alike.

The fate of primitive Buddhism is not exceptional but typical. Whatever one may think of Mr. Wells' own religious views, no serious student of history will take exception to the following general observations regarding primitive Christianity:

"The story of the early beginnings of Christianity is the story of the struggle between the real teachings and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth and the limitations, amplifications and misunderstandings of the very inferior men who had loved and followed him to Gallilee and who were now the bearers and custodians of his message to mankind."

Nor is it possible to dissent from the statement that Paul, who had never seen Jesus, built the ethical and spiritual doctrines of the Nazarine into a subtle theological system, or converted a way of living into a doctrine of belief, the beginning of a creed.

Islam, again, has been corrupted by zealous but credulous and limited disciples. "It was full of the spirit of kindness, generosity and brotherhood"—writes Mr. Wells—"and it was a simple and understandable religion; it was instinct with the chivalrous sentiment of the desert; and it made its appeal straight to the commonest instincts in the composition of ordinary men."

But—"the splendid opening of the story of Islam collapses suddenly into squalid dispute and bickering of heirs and widows." The history of Islam degenerates, to quote Mr. Wells again, "into the normal crimes and intrigues of an Oriental dynasty." Why? Chiefly because Islam, as it spread and stereotyped itself, had to work on a less and less congenial basis—had to grow on soil that distorted and perverted it, answers Mr. Wells. Countless converts were converts only in name; they missed the spirit and essence of the faith they thought they were embracing.

Thus, without multiplying words, one may conclude with Mr. Wells that all great unifying religions "present the same history of

a rapid spreading, like a little water poured over a great area, and then of superficiality and corruption."

Is the history of great political, social and economic movements, of the explosions we call revolutions, different from that of religious reformations? The answer is that it is not. In the words of Mr. R. S. Tawney, in his admirable little book, "The Acquisitive Society," painful experience shows that revolutions take their color and tone from the very system or order they undertake to overthrow.

Take the great French Revolution. Its principles were noble and inspiring. Its leaders were sincere and earnest men. They were ready to sacrifice themselves for the cause of human liberty, equality and fraternity. They were tolerant and humane at the start. But how soon the movement so auspiciously and so thrillingly begun degenerated into the worst form of tyranny, into incredible cruelty and savagery! Leaders of groups and factions were sent to the guillotine for political, ethical or religious opinions which the men temporarily in supreme power deemed heterodox and dangerous. Freedom of speech and publication was suppressed. The tyranny of the liberators and humanitarians became worse than that they had thundered against and overthrown! No wonder the people of France were ready after years of disorder, or bloodshed, of insensate fanaticism and revolting injustice to submit even to Napoleon Bonaparte and his imperial regime!

In our day we have the object lessons of the Russian "social revolution" under the Bolshevik clique of dogmatists and pedants. This "real" or economic revolution was embarked upon for the purpose of completing the task of the political revolution of March, 1917. Lenin, Trotzky and their colleagues, as disciples of Marx, hoped and sought to destroy once and for all the capitalist-bourgeois order in Russia and in the world at large. They thought they had a rare historic opportunity and that it was their sacred mission and privilege to improve it. They had, they claimed, a more advanced type of democracy, a more genuine kind of liberty, to offer to mankind. They were evolutionists *in theory*, and they had written and spoken most earnestly against Utopian or sentimental radicalism that imagined the course of history could be changed, a process of development shortened, by mere willing or sighing or even terrorizing and fighting. But when the temptation seemed to present itself, they yielded. They forgot their science, their stern historical logic, their determinism. Russia was backward, primitive, ignorant, il-

literate, barbarous; yet, after all, perhaps it *was* her lot to lead the West, to set an example of thoroughgoing revolution, to start the world-conflagration. Europe might follow. America was a formidable stumbling block, but she too might follow. The risk might be taken—nay, must be taken.

But when Europe, profiting to some extent by the bitter experience of the Russian victims of premature and non-evolutionary revolution, refused to follow Lenin, what did the Bolshevik pedants do? Acknowledge their blunder and make peace with the intelligent and constructive Russian radicals and literals? No. They persisted in their fatal error, and decline and degeneration set in. Espionage, terror, tyranny, ruthless suppression of the most moderate criticisms, wholesale arrests and executions were—and still are—the means adopted by the Bolshevist dictatorship to retain power and postpone the inevitable—surrender to irresistible forces, to the logic of facts and conditions. The followers and disciples of Lenin and his few associates surpassed their masters in violence, arrogance, impotent rage and ferocity. The great social revolution that was to liberate Russia at one stroke, thrill the world and establish the purest and truest form of democracy has assumed the revolting, abhorrent form of a despotism worse than that of the most reactionary of the czars. Criminals, knaves, hypocrites, bullies, thieves, placemen flocked to the Bolshevik banner. The eventual liquidation of the whole fantastic and stupid experiment became inevitable. “The greatest failure in all history,” Mr. John Spargo calls Bolshevism. *One* of the greatest failures it certainly is, and it dramatically reinforces the many lessons of history that illustrate the law of regression and of the reversion to the mean.

“The Great Man” theory of progress is utterly unsound and fallacious. Humanity is not lifted up and carried forward by heroes, or demi-gods, or super-men. The seers and prophets are those who interpret tendencies rightly, who see things as they are, who forecast the future because they realize all the implications and necessary effects of the present. We cannot appeal to the non-existent. We cannot create something out of nothing. The prophets and leaders, as Mr. Wells says, do but call forth elements that are latent in mind and conscience of hosts of ordinary men and women. We are all strange bundles of contradictions, mixed motives, conflicting instincts and impulses. We are all to a certain extent “educable” and plastic. We respond to the good, and we succumb

to the bad in us. The great leaders make their appeal to the latent good, and for a time they may succeed, perhaps even beyond expectations. But the struggle recommences, the less creditable motives and desires reassert themselves, the old habits insidiously resume control. The reaction that results is not necessarily equal to the action; if it were, no progress would be possible. *Something remains of the new faith*, the conquest over the lower self. The general moral tone in society is higher because of the generous enthusiasm, the infectious zeal, the conversions, the new evangel, the precept and example of the master. We revert to the mean, but the mean is found, in the moral and spiritual realm, to be somewhat or distinctly better than before the change. We say, if we lapse, that we had not really understood ourselves, and that we had not sufficiently identified ourselves, consciously, with our higher qualities. The master had energized, mobilized, organized and made effective the latent and potential forcés.

But we must not fold our hand and wait for the genius, the master, to push us forward and place us on a higher plane. Genius is rare and unforeseen. It is not true—to quote Lord James Bryce, in substance—that the occasion *always* brings the man, or that demand for leadership *always* produces the supply. History flatly contradicts the too optimistic generalization which asserts the contrary. When the master “happens”—and no one can tell beforehand *where* a genius will be thrown up by nature—human advance may be facilitated. But to neglect all the other means of facilitating progress in a moral, spiritual and social direction is to sacrifice the certain, the permanent, for the occasional and accidental. The main effort of high-minded and humanitarian thinkers should be to elevate the mean, the average, by unceasing education and by honest agitation of the problems that challenge attention and enjoin solution under penalties—penalties in the form of misery, friction, ill will, catastrophe. One may not agree with Mr. Wells that history up to date has been “a race between education and catastrophe” in which the latter has generally won, for, if this were true, mankind would not be where it is today intellectually and morally. Progress is a *fact* to the sober-minded student of man and society; not merely a dogma or hope. Education has won many a race in history, but it can win more frequently and more decisively if, instead of depending on exceptional genius, we emphasize constantly the need and ample possibilities of patient, sustained, modest educational work

on democratic lines. The alternative to progress by education is progress by fits and starts, by convulsions—often unfortunate and futile convulsions—with subsequent reversion to the mean. It is unscientific and foolish to underestimate the intelligence of the average body of men and women who suffer by reason of unjust survivals and of maladjustments. If the grievances they are supposed to have are real, and not imaginary, their problems can be stated, formulated and explained to most of them, and so can the proposed solutions. *If humanity cannot be educated, it cannot be reformed.* There are Bourbons in every class that learn nothing and forget nothing, but they are in the minority. What is reasonable in reform makes its appeal to reason. What is just in reform—no matter how radical it may seem at first—strikes a responsive chord in conscience, in the sense of right and honor, and makes the still small voice imperative and compelling. Modern democratic societies, says Bryce, are *what their leaders make them.* This is largely true, though an overstatement of the case. But leadership in a modern society need not be the privilege of the few. It can become the privilege of thousands of thoughtful, sincere men and women in their respective spheres of influence. Newspapers, periodicals, popular books, pamphlets, trade union meetings, civic and cultural clubs—all these, and many other agencies, have it within their power to carry on systematic education of the masses, provided they first fit themselves for the task by earnest study and reflection, and thus gradually elevate the mean.