

# Youth Challenges the Church

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A woman from up-state New York was a visitor in Washington, D.C. From the dizzy summit of the Washington Monument she viewed the various landmarks of our capital city, and then, for the moment forgetting where she was, exclaimed, "But where is the Washington Monument?"

Sometimes we are so close to events and movements that, with no clearly fixed point of view, we lose our bearings. My purpose in developing the announced subject is to locate ourselves and recover our bearings in the swirling eddies of today's youth tide.

For many years the American church has been attempting to challenge American youth, but today youth is challenging the church. Here is the question: with youth ready for great dedications, will the church or some other and unworthy cause enlist youth's loyalty and secure youth's commitment?

## I. THIS IS A PAGAN AGE

### a. *In Sin's Prevalence*

Let us consider the present youth problem against the background of prevailing moral conditions. These conditions may correctly be described as pagan. A few years ago the charge of paganism against this generation brought a shock of surprise and even resentment to such an audience as this. Today such a charge is commonplace. We live in an age when thoughtful men can speak of "the passing of the Christian era." By this they mean not that there are no longer Christian individuals or Christian communions, but that recent generations have carelessly lived off of our Christian heritage without making moral or spiritual replacements until now we are bankrupt.

A pagan order is characterized by two conditions pertaining to sin. One is the prevalence of sin. Who will deny the exceeding sinfulness of this age? Some years ago J. Edgar Hoover declared that crime had so increased in America that we were virtually in a state of civil war with a criminal army of more than four million active enemies engaged in a predacious warfare against our society. This army now numbers seven and a half million finger-printed criminals!

But apart from sins which the law defines as crimes, other sins upon which society places no legal restrictions are increasing to appalling proportions. For example, America spends annually in alcoholic debauchery eight billion dollars. Sins of sex as disclosed by recent investigations are overwhelmingly more prevalent than has commonly been assumed. America's divorce record is a blot on our national character, from one-fourth to one-third as many divorces as marriages

### b. *In Indifference to Sin*

But prevalence of sin does not alone constitute paganism. Perhaps at times and places on the frontiers of American pioneering our forefathers sinned to the same or even greater excess than our generation, but with this difference: they sinned with a keen consciousness of guilt and knew the smart of outraged ideals, whereas our generation sins without scruple, accepting sin without struggle or resistance because ideals have been surrendered. The too general practice of this day accords with the statement of Oscar Wilde, "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." With many, sin has become, in the phrasing of Shakespeare, "not accidental, but a trade."

Yes, our age is pagan; pagan in the appalling prevalence of sin, but more pagan

in the fading consciousness of guilt for sin. What George Eliot wrote of Tito in *Romola* too truly describes this generation: "lips that lie with a dimpled smile, eyes with a gleam than no infamy dulls, a conscience that rises from lust and murder without a haggard look."

Is our indictment too severe? Then listen to the remarks of the editor of the St. Louis *Star-Times* concerning the significance of a recent tragedy which consummated a sex-orgy of teen-agers in the St. Louis area. Editor Toohill charged that the tragedy was "the direct result of the collapse of national morals which has sucked into its vortex the young and weak of all ages, and given the purveyors of filth a Roman holiday." He calls the moral sag which followed World War I "strictly an amateur performance when contrasted to today's slide to the gutter." Among the agencies now destroying our standards he lists certain books, magazines, movies, comic strips, radio scripts, fashion designers, playwrights, and actors. He concludes:

It is society, the American society of the postwar period that apathetically stomachs the conditions that contribute to its own degeneracy. The history of biblical times tells the fate of two city-states—Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember?

## II. THE EFFECTS OF PAGANISM ON YOUTH

### a. *Crime and Delinquency: Breaking Society*

The effects of our American paganism are most clearly seen in the increase of juvenile delinquency and crime. Because of the basic twist of human nature to selfishness, many youth in this era of great individual freedom and relaxed moral restraints have disregarded or defied the laws of society. Without the brakes of social, moral and religious controls, these youth would break society and push it into anarchy.

### b. *Anxiety and Frustration: Broken Personalities*

Although the most obvious consequence of our paganism is lawlessness and crime, there is another area of disaster of which we are becoming increasingly aware. This

is the inner world of youth personality itself. Because of human nature's craving for security, some children and young people react to the freedom and license of the present moral confusion of moral standards with a sense of lostness, turning inward upon themselves to develop anxiety, frustration and vague feelings of guilt.

The damage to personality of the relativity of our modern education is brought out clearly in Dorothy Thompson's report of an interview she had with four graduates of the choicest American colleges. These young men told her how their education had robbed them of their enthusiasms and cut them loose from their moorings, throwing them "into intellectual and psychological confusion, and into an inner despair."

Professor Mowrer of Harvard University told the psychiatrists at the 1948 session of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that anxiety is the vague frustrating fear which disturbs those who have indulged selfish desire with no clear recognition of an objective wrong or sin in such indulgence for which they can suffer a definite sense of guilt. For mental recovery of those suffering from anxiety and frustration, the vague and undefined anxiety should be brought to a focus in a sense of guilt for specific sins which can be dealt with realistically. Without clear standards regulating desire, the victim of anxiety will continue to seek relief "in such futile devices as tobacco, alcohol, gambling, 'sexual Monomania', gluttony." We gather that Dr. Mowrer's position favors definite standards of conduct as a means to mental health and as a safeguard against the growing anxiety and frustration of the prevailing pagan order. Contrary to the late Dr. Freud, high-priest of expressionism, Dr. Mowrer claims that anxiety results not from self-restraint and repression, but from unchecked expressionism and self-indulgence with no recognition of social or moral restraints.

This and the voice of others in very recent years are a far cry from the insistence of leaders in so-called "progressive education" that we should educate in terms of the child's present interests and experi-

ence lest we distort the child's growing personality by forcing upon it harmful adult standards. Increasingly it is being recognized that a disastrous effect of modern paganism on some young people is a broken personality.

*c. Idealism in Reaction Against Selfishness: Revolutionizing Society*

We have noted two areas of disaster in consequence of modern paganism's impact upon youth: First, delinquency and crime in selfish youth; Second, frustration and neurosis in fearful youth. But there is a third area of possible disaster, and yet of peculiar challenge. This is the area of revolutionary idealism. Because of human nature's craving for an ideal beyond itself, some young people rebel against selfish paganism to espouse some cause with full devotion. Such youth provide fertile soil for such militant paganism as Fascism or Communism, and unless captured by a worthy cause will seek to revolutionize society and to rebuild it on undemocratic and non-Christian bases.

Will America and the American church heed the warning of Old World paganism? Dan Poling returned from a world tour shortly before the last war to write his book *Youth Marches*. Therein he tells how everywhere he went in the Old World and the Orient youth were on the march—marching for some cause or questing for a cause which youth felt was bigger than self. Everywhere he went youth were asking him, "Isn't there something better than life?—the cause?—the nation?" In one form or another again and again came this question, "What will a man die for?"

Christian America should blush that it has failed to challenge American youth for Christ as Communism has challenged Russian youth for Moloch! Traveling in Russia shortly before the war, Bishop Cushman encountered a member of the organization of Russia's "godless" youth who said, "Our organization is fighting three things, sex impurity, liquor, and tobacco." Someone asked, "Why are you fighting these things?" The young atheist answered, "We young people can't afford to waste our money or our health when we

have on our hands the job of making a new Russia."

I was speaking along this line a few months ago on the campus of a state college, and had pointed to the danger of reaction of American youth from selfish to militant paganism on the order of Hitler's youth movement. At the conclusion of my message one of the professors, a refugee from Hitler's Germany, came to me in great earnestness and declared his alarm that in our moral looseness we are today where Germany was in the 'twenties when Hitler began his drive for power and channeled the aimless energies of German youth behind his cause.

Can the church in America out-bid revolutionary paganism for the loyalty of youth? Certainly not with easy concessions to youth's assumed love of self such as the church too generally has been offering these many years in a despairing effort to compete with selfish paganism. Church and school have rapidly been losing their youth-appeal at this very point of excessive pampering, just as selfish paganism elsewhere has yielded to militant and revolutionary paganism. American education and the American church have bungled youth psychology where Hitler and Stalin have scored success!

### III. AMERICAN YOUTH IN QUEST OF A CAUSE.

But perhaps you object that American youth are immune to the contagion of enthusiasm for a cause that entails hardship and sacrifice. I answer, the evidence is clear that there is a rising tide of idealism among American youth.

Witness an editorial in *The Daily Iowan* appearing as a half-page plea for discipline and hard work, addressed to the faculty of the University of Iowa under the caption, TAKE US BACK TO SOLID GROUND. Note the report by Doris Drucker of the results of a survey of college youth across the nation, showing that these young people now see that their homes during their high-school years failed to give them the direction and discipline they now see they needed in such homely matters as the books and magazines they read, the radio programs they listened to, the company they

sought, the habits they formed. The writer closes the article with the statement that perhaps for the first time in modern history a youth generation clamors not for more freedom "but wants less freedom and more security." And the evidence can be extended.

In clearly discernible measure American youth are ready for a supreme dedication, and in the years just ahead will find some cause which challenges to heavy sacrifice, even unto death.

God grant that dedication may be to the Cross of Jesus Christ, that cause may be the building of His church on earth. The church has Christ's answer for selfish and delinquent youth: *He that loseth his life for Christ's sake shall find it.* It has his answer for fearful youth: *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.* The church has Christ's answer for revolutionary youth: *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*