

The Problem of the Future

The Hollywood mentality, with its mania for a 'happy ending' in any and all phases of human life and activity, is well on its way to becoming dominant in our Western world outlook. Even among those who sense the fundamental shallowness which the movie industry is fostering on every hand, there is a blind faith that some temporal tomorrow will bring a fulfillment to today's incomplete experience. Now, it is normal to hope that the new sunrise will mark a break with the evils and contradictions of today. What is not so clear is, just what we may reasonably expect any historical change to achieve for us.

Whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, man seems to be incurably eschatological in his outlook. The reader is doubtless aware that a self-confident scholarship has been inclined to view patronizingly the entire question, and to suggest that eschatology was a convenient mode of adjustment for an age which was defective in reducing the margin of the unexplained and the unpredictable to a tolerable width. It is implied, however, that we now have no need for this type of outlook. Rather, our age has assumed that the increase of natural and historical knowledge has rendered it a bit absurd.

Few will deny that the interpreters of the eschatology of the Bible have frequently been misled into shallow and unwarranted extremes. In some exceptional cases its adherents have so interpreted it as to suggest that the Christian approach to human problems ought to be one of complete indifference; 'let the Church be the Church', say some, this remark implying that only such activity as conduces to the preparation of men for eternity is worthy of the devout. There are, however, some encouraging signs in

the direction of an increasing sense of social responsibility upon the part of many groups of conservative Christians.

Those groups, however, who inveigh against the abuses which extreme eschatological interpretations produce ought to remember that the so-called social gospel has its own Messianism. The writer is aware that the proponents of this latter type of religious approach are recently more sensitive to the realities of the times. Probably the roseate social expectations of Rauschenbusch and his followers are vanishing among even more liberal groups of Christians today. At least some of them are aware that the State is taking over many of the functions formerly claimed by the 'social gospel' so that liberal Christianity must alter its mode of attack.

More significant still is the emphasis in many liberal quarters upon the essentially fragmentary and problematic character of all temporal life. Historic Christianity owes a great deal to the Theology of Crisis at this point. While conservative Christians cannot overlook the fact that the theologians of this movement are essentially 'liberal' in their approach to the Scriptures, they ought to welcome the emphasis of the latter upon the essentially eschatological character of the Christian faith.

It would be wholesome if at some time a representative of liberal Christianity would frankly recognize that the conventional theological liberalism is itself a form of Messianism. Communism is more frank in its approach to the problem, openly avowing the temporal and earthly character of its proposed millenium. It is difficult to see just how the former can expect to effectively oppose the latter by any technique of fighting fire with fire. If

we are to acquiesce in *any* belief in a temporal tomorrow in which today's broken experience will be brought to completion, then it seems almost logical to cast in our lot with that movement which promises most in temporal realization. Upon these terms the Christian Church will probably seem to many to be a poor competitor to Stalinism.

Underlying much of temporal Messianism is some degree of acceptance of historical dynamism—some belief that history itself is a mover. The adherents of the social gospel seemed certain that just as certain specialized abuses (such as African slavery) were left behind, so also all of the evils which human life manifests *must* in the sweep of the new social awakening be overcome. This view cannot wholly disavow its kinship with the philosophy of Marx, who taught that the dialectic of history was moving unalterably in a given direction.

May it not be that all such philosophies of history share the fallacy of giving a false concreteness to such an abstraction as 'history'? Such a fallacy glides easily into a baseless confidence in the power of history to work for man. This in turn is not materially different from a dogmatic assertion of man's power to achieve, by himself and unaided by any super-temporal Source, the solution of his own ills. In other words, perhaps the Religious Humanists are right in their assertion that theological liberalism is an untenable half-way house between 'outmoded orthodoxy' and frank humanism.

In the light of this, may it not be timely to re-assert the difference between pagan confidence in history and Christian faith in God? Such an assertion will be emphatic at the point of the biblical insight of God as Lord of History. It will be satisfied with no view of God as immanent in the tem-

poral process, but must and will declare the distinction between eternity and time, ceasing at the same time to assert the ultimateness of human finite experience. To most of the forms of contemporary liberal thought, these will seem to be hard sayings; few can bear them. And yet perhaps men will have to.

We sometimes forget that our vaunted increase of human knowledge is limited to knowledge of past and present. By a merciful arrangement we are, as Reinhold Niebuhr points out, as ignorant of the future as was Abraham. At the same time, we must in some manner dispose of what might be called the problem of the future. It is the purpose of the remainder of this editorial to indicate some factors with which we must reckon in dealing with this problem.

Essential, first, is a recognition of the problematic and broken character of all temporal life. This is hard on our youthful idealism, by which we anticipate certain milestones, the attainment of which is expected to bring emancipation from certain major problems and limitations. Human experience is all but unanimous in declaring that life turns back upon us in our facile expectations. When, for example, we reach the age of twenty-one, we discover that at best we trade new frustrations for old ones, and that attainment of our majority brings no absolute severance from any significant problem of our minority.

The numerous frustrations of the present tend to cause us to rely much too heavily upon points of transition, and upon the siren song of a glib 'new day.' There is evidence that multitudes find the present tolerable only upon the basis of hope. This is not to be condemned in itself; what is to be deplored is that too many trust in wrong kind of a future. Perhaps the Christian ministry has been unfaith-

ful in its failure to be realistic at the point of the fractured character of all temporal life. There is danger in expecting too much in the here-and-now. It is perhaps time to be hard-headed in presenting the truth, that while within the law of averages our earthly life may yield a good measure of legitimate satisfactions, that its ultimate meaning *cannot* be found here. A recognition of this basic pluralism in temporal experience will fortify against a multitude of disillusionments. The second ingredient in the Christian approach to the problem of the future is the type of faith which brings meaning into the experience of today. It is by no means easy to maintain the balance between a Christian view of the *eschaton* on the one hand, and the Christian view of the present on the other. Many of us have little difficulty in anticipating the day when divine grace will "make all things new." It is not so easy to live in the light of a faith which sanctifies the present. And yet there is an intensely practical quality to the Christian gospel, in which complete trust in a sovereign God brings fulfillment and ultimate meaning to the details of the life of today.

This fulfillment does not yield the removal of the perplexities which grow out of the problematic character of finite life. In reality it pierces through our facile hopes for a monism in the temporal life of today. In their place it affords a strong confidence that the minutiae of present experience are "working together for our good," that God is synchronizing even those details which seem inconsequential in the fulfilment of a master plan. And in this plan no fragment of today's life is insignificant. To the Christian, every day is a holy day: every choice is a decisive one: every action may be performed *unto Him*.

The final factor to be noted in this connection is that Christian eschatol-

ogy does issue in an active confidence in a final restitution of all things—an ultimate recapitulation of all things under the headship of Christ. In this final summation the fragmentary character of today's experience will be transcended, and its ultimate significance disclosed. This involves, of course, not only a belief in personal immortality, but a recognition of the utterly moral and spiritual character of the Christian goal. Eternal life, in the Christian sense, is conditioned by personal redemption. It is thus much more than prolongation of existence.

Faith thus becomes specialized in the case of him who takes Christian eschatology seriously. It finds no resting place short of the confident realization, in the here and now, of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ which comes to grips with man's basic problem at the levels at which it occurs. This personal realization is, at heart, an anticipation in the life of the individual of the final recapitulation of all things. The problem of human sin, is by no means a simple one. Objectors may raise questions at the point of what actions are sinful which we cannot answer. But raising questions does not eliminate from the enlightened consciousness the apprehension which human disobedience to the most elementary principles of conduct produces. On the other hand, multitudes have lived in strong confidence of divine forgiveness of sins upon the basis of redemption in Christ.

The Christian outlook toward the future produces, moreover, a dissatisfaction with man's congenital moral disposition. Without giving a blanket assent to the conclusions of the newer psychology, especially to those forms which emphasize the study of the unconscious and/or the subconscious, we believe that this movement affords some aid and comfort to those holding the historic Christian

view of original sin. To say the least, modern psychology finds sinister and unpredictable forces seething in the deeper reaches of the inner life, and finds difficulty in holding any rose-tinted view of man's deepest nature.

Those who take seriously the historic biblical message in this connection cannot but be exercised at the point of the manner in which the Christian gospel proposes to deal with

this innate disturbance. Perhaps it is for this reason that the theme of Christian Perfection will not 'down and stay dead.' To face realistically the problem of the future one cannot, at any rate, be cavalier with the question of man's disorder and God's design for its treatment. In the light of this, possibly the historic message of Scriptural Holiness has a new and fresh relevance.

—H. B. K.

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