

Under the Spell of An Idea

It is scarcely possible to overestimate the rôle of ideas in the achievement called History. Against the view, so popular twenty years ago, that human events are chiefly the outcome of the operation of economic and sociological forces, has been placed in more recent years an emphasis upon the power of ideas to shape events and to lend homogeneity to an epoch of time. In this newer study mistakes have been made. Some have, under the spell of modern dynamism, personified the movement of history and have sought to understand it in the light of a deterministic operation of the dialectic of ideas. Others have thought of ideas as genes which impart to history a particular kind of shape in advance.

A more moderate view is that, while ideas *do* serve to condition history, ideas are themselves products of human endeavor, at least in the sense that they are received, elaborated or modified and transmitted to succeeding generations. Thus, while ideas promote the development of a culture, they are also influenced by culture. While there are no 'pure ideas'—ideas apart from minds which hold them—neither is there 'pure history.' As Whitehead says,

This notion of historians, of history devoid of aesthetic prejudice, of history devoid of any reliance upon metaphysical principles and cosmological generalizations, is a figment of imagination.¹

A careful analysis will reveal that the number of assumptions basic to a culture is fairly small, and that these are frequently derived from one master-generalization, which itself serves to lend coherence to intellectual

life. In seeking to understand the ideas which have been most powerfully dominant in the shaping of our modern age, one must bear in mind that the higher generalizations of a period are likely to be implicit rather than explicit. They are most frequently expressed in terms of their derivatives, these latter serving as a 'front' for the basic generalizations.

It should be remembered that the vitality of an idea is not dependent upon its truth or falsity. No one will deny that the geocentric astronomy was a powerful intellectual determinant in the Middle Ages, though it later proved to be untenable. Perhaps the most difficult task for any age is that of realizing that its basic principles are in reality assumptions. The difficulty here rises from the apparent tendency of minds to be dazzled by ideas; or to put it another way, the mentality of any period is subject to self-hypnosis, with the result that enthusiasm for fundamental principles obscures the power of criticism so that these principles are accepted as absolute truths. Only here and there can be found minds sufficiently frank and objective to admit that they are assumptions and subject to either transformation or abandonment.

The thought world of the eighteenth century, with its emphasis upon the order of nature as comprehended by reason and as laying a foundation for natural religion, was radically transformed in the nineteenth century. The early romanticists, while accepting the majestic concept of order in nature, gave to that concept a new interpretation. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and the first half of the nineteenth, there came into the thinking of the western world a growing interest in the idea of

¹ Whitehead, Alfred North, *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: Macmillan, 1933, p. 4.

development, not now as a universal process bearing all forward as on a great wave, but as a temporal, and in a sense local, forward movement in which every existing thing has come to its present state by pursuing its own laws of development.

We should not imagine that Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was the chief factor in the transition from the typical eighteenth century mentality to that of our 'modern' period. In point of fact, the works of Lessing, Herder and Hegel in Germany, and of the Encyclopedists and (later) Cousin in France, had popularized the conception of development until the learned world was so conditioned as to quickly accept the views of Darwin. The effect of his work was, it seems, to convince the scientific world that whatever difficulties may be found in proving the *how* of evolution, the *that* of evolution is undeniable. For eighty years, the generality of scientific men have held as a dogma, that all forms of life have developed from a few simple forms.

The application of the hypothesis of evolution has been widespread and fearless: the principle has been conscripted to do service in the fields not only of biology, but of stellar origins, of psychology, of society and social configurations, of morals, and of religion. Underlying this manifold use is a principle really more basic, or at least more elemental, namely that of *continuity*. It is this generalization which has conditioned the major part of modern thought.

Implied in the principle of continuity is the rejection of all dualisms, and particularly the rejection of the dualism of natural and supernatural. In place of this has been substituted in modern thought the monistic view of the world as externalizing one cosmic principle. God, man, and nature thus meet on common ground: all are parts of a growing whole.

Within this scheme, the process of development appeared to some as the supreme expression of the divine life.

When the explanations offered by Lamarck, Darwin, and De Vries were successively weighed and found wanting, at least two alternatives were open to twentieth-century thinkers: they might begin to question the validity of the principle of continuity itself; or they might continue to hold the principle as truth, and seek some other mode of explanation. That the latter alternative has been generally chosen few will deny. The charm of the idea of continuity for the modern mind has been great. Under its sway one of the men considered to possess a mind as keen as any in our generation writes:

For example, at a remote period urged by the growth of forests some mammals ascended trees and became apes; and then later, after the lapse of some vast period, urged by the decay of forests, the same race descended from trees and became men.²

This does not mean that the thinkers who dogmatically accept the evolutionary hypothesis are content to remain without a rationale for their belief. The latest attempt at explanation is that known as 'creative' or 'emergent' evolution, a metaphysical theory whose assumptions are quite other than the empiricism of which science boasts. Carl F. H. Henry comments as follows:

Modern science first revolted against theistic creationism because of its supposed "non-scientific" character. But now science has reacted to the inability of Darwinian evolution to produce missing links, by the proclamation of a speculative theory of reality whose pivot points are rooted not in science but in philosophy.³

Perhaps sufficient has been said concerning the power of the conception of continuity in general to indicate that it exercises a two-fold tyranny in

² Whitehead: *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³ *Remaking the Modern Mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946. p. 118.

our modern day. It has so captured the fancy of the scholarly world that no paucity of evidence in its support can bring the modern mind to treat it skeptically. And, it has succeeded in forcing its canons upon all branches of scholarly investigation until it may fairly be said to be the predominant motif in the typically modern way of thinking.

In few fields of scholarship has the application of the generalization of continuity been more fearlessly applied than in the field of religion. It is not the purpose of this editorial to trace the implications of this principle for the historic Christian doctrines of creation, revelation, human nature, and redemption, and for the Christian eschatology. A little reflection will reveal that the searching application of the evolutionary hypothesis will necessitate not only a radical trans-

formation of the character of the historic Christian system, but a denial of its qualitative superiority over the other religious systems of men.

It is significant that in this very field in which the principle of continuity has for nearly a century been embraced with such enthusiasm, there are indications of some searching of heart. By the kind consent of Dr. Robert H. Pfeiffer, editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, we are reprinting a book review, written by Dr. Walther Eichrodt, Professor of Old Testament in the University of Basel. The editor of *The Asbury Sem-inarian* is very grateful to his former teacher for this permission, which allows us to bring to our readers a stimulating and scholarly expression of the newer temper.

—H. B. K.
