

The Need for a Positive Philosophy of Life*

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Three years ago I had lunch with Mr. H. G. Wells. We were discussing the world, and more particularly the ideal world which is so often pictured in his books. I told him frankly that I did not believe in this march of humanity towards a glorious future, and asked him whether he also was not beginning to have doubts about it. He replied that it was a question of time, and that the events of a hundred years were of little importance on the scale of man's existence on this earth. One must not, therefore, be dismayed if the progress were slow and interrupted from time to time by temporary retrograde movements. Still, he admitted that there were certain disquieting features in the present situation. He complained of our tendency to tinker with our difficulties, when a wholesale and radical change of method was required. To give point to his remarks he contrasted the attitude of a Frenchman to machinery with that which he believed to be characteristic of the American. Whereas the Frenchman was essentially a botcher, the American scrapped what was inefficient and started all over again. If an engine worked badly, he threw it on the scrap heap and designed a new model. Although I do not see eye to eye with Mr. H. G. Wells, I am going to make use of this dictum of his in what is to follow. During the last fifty years we have all been botchers. Deep within us we have known that the machinery of living was working badly, yet all that we have done has been to attempt to make it run more smoothly by lubricating it with a variety of patent oils; psycho-analysis and its many derivatives, various forms of mental and social hygiene, social welfare and fitness campaigns, vigilance committees and a host of measures for the improvement of young people, of factory workers' conditions, of the labouring classes, and, indeed, of most other sections of the community. But varied and comprehensive though all these methods of treating the world's ills may have been, they all have this in common, that they have been superficial and incomplete. None of them has gone sufficiently deep to touch what has been, and still is, basically wrong in our method of living.

When I advocate a far more radical dealing with our ills, please do not mistake me for a revolutionary out for an explosive treatment of society. I am speaking not so much of social ills, which are to a great extent secondary phenomena, but of the spiritual errors which are the primary cause of them. What I am advocating is that we should examine critically all the values by which we have been living. It is these that have determined the general direction in which we have moved. It is the nation's fundamental beliefs which form the basis of the particular form of society that it creates for itself. C. E. M. Joad, in *Philosophy for our Time*, coined a new phrase by which to describe the age which, it is to be hoped, is drawing to its close. He calls it the "stomach and pocket age", meaning thereby that we have

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mistaken comfortable living and commercial prosperity for progress. However grandly we may have talked—and we have talked superlatively well!—we have lived for worldly ideals. These ideals have not only controlled each of us as individuals, but also the larger lives of the nations. If we are honest we must confess that, whatever may have been our nominal beliefs, we have lived like good honest materialists. Our “great” men, the men whose names have filled the honours lists, were the heads of great businesses. It was from their ranks that we elected our rulers, and the rulers of a nation are but symbols of the national mode of thought. We wanted good sound men of business and we got them. It is not surprising, therefore, that the assemblies which used to be held at Geneva had the character of meetings in a market-place, where clever merchants vie with each other in driving hard bargains. I do not for one moment believe that the pre-war age was particularly corrupt; it was neither better nor worse than its predecessors. What made it so dangerous was the fact that during the last fifty years science has been lavishing on us powers which we are quite unfitted to use. We are like children to whom an irresponsible outsider has given powder and matches. These gifts have led to our undoing, for whilst our control over external nature has advanced with a terrifying speed, our inner nature has remained as it was. We have still to discover what we have assumed we automatically possessed, namely, a proper technique of living.

Gilbert Murray, in a recent broadcast, drew a parallel between our own times and those of Athens when Socrates was walking its streets. Socrates, he pointed out, had once been the most prominent man of science in Athens, but he eventually arrived at the conclusion that scientific theories and discoveries were not the things that really mattered. What seemed to him to be of the utmost importance was that men should be better, with more “virtue” and more “goodness”. These were the qualities to which men of science had given little or no consideration at all. They lay outside their terms of reference. When he asked his fellow-Athenians for a definition of these attributes, they floundered and began to contradict themselves. Socrates made himself very unpopular—and it must be admitted that his methods of questioning were highly irritating—by showing how ignorant the Athenians were about the true meaning of the words which they used so glibly. Undoubtedly he must have realized that he was annoying his fellow citizens, but he was of the opinion that by questioning people he would induce them to think more clearly, to examine their lives and eventually to discover what good living really meant. If Socrates had walked the streets of London during the last twenty years he would have found that his difficulties were even greater than those which he had encountered in Athens. Few people would have had time for his questioning, and most of those whom he buttonholed would have thought him a silly and impertinent old man. If he had obtained an answer to his inquiry as to what was implied by the good life, it would have been to the effect that it meant a comfortable home, a successful career and the respect of one’s neighbours. Socrates was condemned to death by those who resented a public exposure of the fatuity of their own thinking. We would have been less drastic in our treatment of him. We would probably have allowed him a soap-box in Hyde Park and have left it to the police to decide whether he did or did not

constitute a public nuisance. But whatever his contemporaries in Athens thought, the young men of that city were impressed by his questionings. This is evident from the terms of his indictment, for he was charged with "denying the gods whom the city worshipped, bringing in the worship of other strange gods, and misleading the youth of the city". According to Professor Murray, it had become quite an entertainment in Athens during Socrates' lifetime to listen to his polite questioning of some self-important official, and it almost seemed as though that were all he had achieved. But the professor went on to point out that after his death Socrates' sceptical attitude to current ideals began to bear fruit. Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle began to write, and with the rise of the Stoic and Epicurean schools of philosophy a new light burst upon Greece.

No Socrates has yet appeared in our midst, but somehow I have the feeling that even in his absence many young people are beginning to question what we older people have hitherto taken for granted, namely, that prosperity was synonymous with progress. Even although some of us are repeating the old slogans and talking about the search for new markets, many of the younger generation are already dreaming of a new world when this war is finished. They are convinced that all is not well with the world, that old ideas must be scrapped and that an end must be made of botching. The fact that they put all the blame on the older generation and are confident that they will make a far better job of living than did their fathers, is unimportant, for each generation has thought this in turn. What is of importance is that there is a general tendency to examine what has too long been accepted without question.

The fact that these younger people show little enthusiasm for organized religion does not alter my opinion that there is a general movement towards a more spiritual form of life. In the overhauling of old ideals, the tenets of the church must also be submitted to examination. There must be no privilege of the clergy in this general examination of the foundations of belief. We cannot afford to assume that we are a Christian nation, or that even the best of us are attempting to live according to the tenets laid down in the Sermon on the Mount. It is quite clear from the start that there has never existed such an anomaly as a Christian nation. It is equally obvious that even the clergy have found the Sermon on the Mount too difficult for them. The Church, like the rest of us, has been content to tinker with the more obvious defects in our method of living, and to hope for the best. During the twenty-odd years that separate us from the last war, the Church, as an institution, has only brought in one measure of reform, the re-editing of the Prayer Book. This was a purely domestic measure, the passing or the rejection of which was a matter of indifference to the world at large. A certain amount of enthusiasm was also shown by the ecclesiastical party for various schemes of social welfare, for the preservation of the English sabbath and for the safeguarding of the institution of marriage. It has also been much preoccupied with the relation of the sexes, and with the restriction of the size of the family by the use of contraceptives. All of these activities were comparatively unimportant and could be safely embarked upon without risk of becoming unpopular with those who contributed to the Church's financial support.

It would have been unwise and undiplomatic to have imitated Socrates' irritating methods and questioned the whole basis of our living. Because of its poor record in initiating reform, those who are now examining fundamentals do not look to the State Church for leadership. But although the younger generation is sceptical of institutional religion, it is not necessarily sceptical of religion, and it is seldom that even an ardent anti-clerical shows anything but profound reverence for the teaching of Christ. He may regard the teaching as impracticable, he may feel that the ideals that Christ taught are beyond the attainment of ordinary mankind, but deep within him he has the conviction that Christ's words were true.

I fully understand the attitude that the young intellectual of to-day adopts to institutional religion, and, like him, I do not expect a new movement to start within the churches. In saying this I have no wish to minimize the Church's services. Throughout these disappointing years the Church has kept burning—as did the Catholic Church in the Dark Ages of Europe—a small light which has reminded mankind that there exists a spiritual, as well as a material, world. It has been a symbol of a higher level of living. Also, there have existed within the churches countless individuals who, to the best of their ability and in the face of great difficulties, have tried to live according to the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. But as a body, the Church has failed, and unless some great change comes over it, it is likely to have but little influence over our future.

It is always necessary to make a distinction between the teaching of institutionalized religion and the words of the great founders of religion, so far as we can understand them. What has happened to Christianity has happened to all the great religions of the world. Because the truths expounded by its founder have been too obscure and too difficult for mankind, they have been watered down and a little sugar added. Symbols used by Christ to express ideas that could not otherwise be presented have been understood literally and much of the inner meaning of his teaching has been lost. It is indeed difficult, or impossible, for us to understand much in the teaching of Christ and Buddha, but when we do understand it, we find that it is fraught with meaning. To me, the New Testament and the sacred books of the East contain truths of far greater psychological significance than all the clever writings of the modern psychologists. The authors of these works knew much more about the human mind and the human spirit than any of our great scientists and specialists, and they alone have been able to lay down a truly scientific method of living. Whilst our modern psychologists are able to resolve some of our conflicts, they cannot, and they make no attempt to, tell us how we should live. Freud frankly confessed that he was not interested in religion, and by religion he meant an attitude to life. The analytic method relieves us of some of our difficulties, and then leaves us to get on with our lives as best we can. Adler's only message is that we should adjust ourselves to society, Jung's that we should find our right style of life. Please do not imagine that I do not appreciate the debt we owe to medical psychologists.

When I say that the New Testament and the sacred books of the East are profound psychological treatises, I mean that if we could take them as a guide to conduct, we should escape from many of the psychological dilemmas in which we now find

ourselves. Take, for example, the principle of non-attachment, which constitutes such an important part of the teaching of Buddha. The same principle was enunciated by Christ, although less explicitly: "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. . . . Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself."

Christ saw how caught up people were with the lesser issues of life, how pre-occupied with, and immersed in, their own immediate wishes. When he bade the rich young ruler give what he had to the poor, he was not so much thinking of the needs of the poor as of those of the rich young ruler, who was over-preoccupied with his possessions. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." It may well have been that the young ruler was so attached to, and dependent on, his worldly position that he had no existence as an individual apart from these. The acceptance of the principle of non-attachment is the only real cure for all our anxieties and worries. And detachment does not, as is often believed, imply either indifference or complete inertia. Those who are dominated by their desires are entirely controlled by them. Only when a man is more detached is he able to see clearly, and, by acting wisely, to attain what he desires.

A second principle which Christ and Buddha taught was that we should interpret life in terms of purpose. If anyone who was puzzled about the meaning of life had consulted a scientist at the beginning of this century, he would have been told that life on this globe was the result of accident. It had no purpose. A concatenation of favourable circumstances happened to exist and as a result the world grew a sort of fungus, which is called "life". There was no meaning in this development, and so far as could be seen, the film of organic life on the surface of the earth served no purpose. Indeed, according to the scientist, it was doubtful whether there existed any plan behind the universe, the whole of it having come into being as the result of the blind interplay of a number of forces. It was no wonder that many who accepted this view of the universe became pessimistic, and were, indeed, inclined to agree with Bertrand Russell that the only attitude for any intelligent man to adopt was one of unrelieved despair. Fortunately the modern scientist is becoming less materialistic in his outlook, and at the same time, more modest in his attempts to interpret the world. If we consult him he confesses that he is unable to give an answer to the questions which we bring to him. Even the philosophers, whose task it is to examine these riddles, sometimes give us answers which we would not expect from the lips of a philosopher. A well-known English philosopher recently confessed to me that, after all these years of study, he was returning to the simple teaching, which, as a boy, he had fiercely repudiated. "I am more and more coming to the conclusion," he said, "that life can only be interpreted satisfactorily in terms of a struggle between good and evil." This was essentially the teaching of Christ and Buddha.

There echoes through the words I have been using a faint overtone of sanctity and piety, which, try as I might, I have not been able to eliminate. A personal explanation must therefore be interpolated. Please let it be understood that I do not belong to the Oxford Group, am not a member of any church or religious body

and that the conclusions at which I have arrived are the result of a scientific, rather than of a religious, study of the sayings of Christ and Buddha.

Whatever may be the outcome of this stocktaking which I believe to be taking place, this critical overhauling of old ideals, there can be no doubt that it is a sign of health. I would even go so far as to say that it is a true mental hygiene. Too long has the material world been at a premium and the world of values at a discount. Many people had not only given up searching for the true, the good and the beautiful, but had even forgotten that they existed. Most of us were content to take life at its face value, to ask no questions and to get on with the business of living. For those of a more altruistic nature, who were unable to leave things as they were, humanitarianism offered an outlet. "The greatest good of the greatest number" was the religious creed of the warm-hearted intellectual, who did his best to make the machinery run more smoothly by means of all those patent "oils" to which we have already alluded.

But in spite of this new disposition to overhaul old ideals, there still remain many who sincerely believe that everything can be remedied by a more skilful organization of society along scientific lines. Those who hold this idea feel that by means of better education, by a more equal distribution of wealth and by the elimination of certain abuses, a satisfactory future for humanity can be assured. But surely most of us must, by now, realize that a reconstruction of the external framework of society in the absence of any change in the inner heart of man is useless? If any proof of the truth of this statement were necessary we have only to look back at the lamentable story of the League of Nations. Exhausted and disillusioned by the last war, the nations of Europe created at Geneva a vast organization which was housed in the Palace of Peace, a building so immense that it contained about three miles of corridors. Here, amidst beautiful surroundings and organized by a formidable secretariat, innumerable committees met to draw up complicated forms of procedure. Henceforth the world was to be run on new and intelligent lines. The hopes of humanity rose. What happened? To the meetings of the League of Nations came the same men with the same ideals, the same thoughts and emotions. Within the Palace of Peace the same old methods of double-dealing were carried on by the "cardsharps" of international politics. Only in a few departments, such as those concerned with matters of health, traffic in drugs, women and children, the improvement of labour conditions and the suppression of certain obvious abuses, was anything of value achieved. Elsewhere, the old cynical crowd of politicians arrived at their secret understandings in the informal meetings which took place in the intervals between the assemblies. In a few years the work of those idealists who had sincerely believed that this was the beginning of a new age had been wrecked; the vast external structure of the League of Nations had become nothing but a hollow sham, a camouflage for political trickery.

Let us turn from this gloomy picture of the past to the more hopeful signs of the present moment. I believe with Havelock Ellis and many others that the religious sense is innate in mankind, and that deep in himself man is conscious of his need for a religion, or some positive philosophy. However long it may lie in abeyance,

however strong may be the forces that are exerted in an effort to crush it, this feeling eventually asserts itself. In a broadcast on Sunday, June 29th of this year, we were told that 12,000 people, under the stress of the great national emergency, gathered in the cathedral in Moscow to take part in a service presided over by the Chief Patriarch. Similar services were held in a large number of other Russian churches. Now, for nearly a quarter of a century, the Bolshevik government has done its utmost to root out every vestige of religion in Russia. Anti-religious propaganda has been widely disseminated, the monasteries closed, the churches stripped of everything which could remind the peasants of their former beliefs, and the walls of the cathedrals covered with blasphemous posters. Yet, at the first threat to the safety of the Fatherland, the unquenchable religious sense of the Slav reasserted itself. Even though this innate reaching out for higher values may sometimes end in nothing but superstitions, in it lies man's chief hope for a better world.

Before reading this paper to you I tried it out on a friend in order that I might have the benefit of his criticism. This was to the effect that, like most other people who are disillusioned about the world's progress, I have been destructive rather than constructive. I have offered no alternative to the efforts that are being made by hopeful people to reorganize humanity along new lines, and have merely stated that without a change in values these are foredoomed to failure. I would like before I sit down to correct this impression. External organization is necessary, for unless a stable and liberal form of society be constructed, all our efforts to lead a better life will be rendered abortive. In modern totalitarian states there exists so little freedom that no individual is able to seek what platonists call "the good life". By all means let us strive to construct a background which is favourable to the development of the higher side of man's nature. But, and this is the centre of gravity of all that I have attempted to say, do not let us for a moment delude ourselves that external organization alone will achieve any lasting results. Somewhere I have read that an Oriental once made the following comment on us: "You have learnt how to fly above the clouds, you have learnt how to swim in the depths of the sea, but so far you have not learnt how to walk upon the surface of the earth." Let us hope that in the years to come we shall learn at last even this, the greatest of all lessons.

"In my last Report, I expressed the opinion that there would be no notable increase in nervous illness during the war. The reason for this is that in the majority of such cases, the illness is due to personal problems, and the effect of the war is to encourage us to put our personal worries on one side, realizing the difficulties which face the country as a whole. . . . We must, however, look to the aftermath of the war. If peace brings with it another slump with consequent unemployment and a sense of personal economic insecurity, then we shall certainly see a sharp rise in the number of cases of nervous and psychotic illness."

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