

The Future of Religion

by PAUL HUTCHINSON

I

WESTERN religion, I have tried to point out in three preceding articles, is entering on an ordeal more severe than any it has known for at least four hundred years. There was, to be sure, much the same sort of three-sided struggle in the period of Augustine and again in that of Luther. Then, as now, religion found itself involved in conflict with the state and with society, while it was at the same time wrestling with a widespread demand for restatement of its own dogma. The results were of major importance to history. But there is a scale to the contemporary drama that makes possible tragedy of a vaster and deeper kind than man has ever known.

Incalculable human devotion has gone into bringing Western religion to the point at which it now stands. Is that devotion to issue in futility? Is the end of the worship of the generations to be the ruin of deserted altars and, what is infinitely more tragic, a sense of man's loneliness amid his approach to extinction? It is much easier to attempt a report as to the position in which religion now finds itself than to prophesy as to what the answer may prove to be to such questions. Yet it is impossible to discover that this institution which holds so precious a deposit of human hopes stands at the beginning of such an ordeal, without attempting to assess the portents. Is this *only* an ordeal, to issue in some brighter destiny? Or is it the approach of dissolution?

Let it be said at once that any judgment as to the outlook for religion will depend on one's conception of the nature and significance of the present day. To those who believe that what is going on now is no more than a surface disturbance, an indication of an unrest that can be alleviated and satisfied by a reform program held within the limits of the present social order, the prospect for religion will be of one sort. To those who believe that the West is moving into a basic change of civilization —

such a change, for example, as came with the disappearance of feudalism — the prospect for religion will be of an entirely different sort. It therefore becomes necessary for me to drop the reporter's anonymity and to inject a personal element which, however presumptuous, is required to make clear the view of modern life which underlies my expectations as to the future.

Here, then, is my credo: I believe that we are living in a day which sees the final destruction of the illusion of inevitable progress which Herbert Spencer and the Victorian evolutionists fastened upon the pre-war liberalism of the West. Even in America, where adventitious aids made a cloudless optimism seem reasonable as long after the World War as the campaign speeches of Mr. Hoover in 1928, man now finds himself confronting the possibility of chaos quite as much as of triumph, and discovering that catastrophe is much closer than either a dependable peace or a just, and therefore stable, world order.

Accordingly, I believe that we have come to one of the great turning-points in man's story, at which there will emerge either genuine and successful social revolution, or such a frustration of the aspirations and demands of the masses, with consequent despair, as will thrust the West into another dark age. Thus the terrific task of Western religion, as I see it, becomes that of maintaining for man direction and meaning in his life, not only against the encompassing chaos of an unfathomed and affrighting universe, but even more against the overwhelming confusion of an immediate social situation in which all the instruments of social organization, including those of religion itself, are under attack and in prospect of vital change.

II

WHAT, then, may one reasonably expect the experience of those within the religious

institution to be as the conflict and confusion of this developing world revolution increase?

As to the greater number of churches and churchmen it is my belief that there will ensue a retreat into the institution, a refusal to acknowledge the fact of the revolution — or, to put it perhaps more accurately, of the revolution's validity — and an intensification of devotion to historic formulas of worship that will persist for as long as the present social order itself persists. This is a prospect disliked, and indeed denied, with equal vehemence by social and religious radicals. The characteristic prophecy of both groups is that "if the church does not" declare itself a partisan of whatever forms of revolution the radicals favor, "it will die." If this prophecy has in view a future in terms of a number of centuries, and if it concerns only the "regular" forms of church communities, it may turn out to be true. One would be a fool who would attempt to say what may or may not happen to *any* social agency in the course of another half-millennium. At that, I confess my skepticism. In the eyes of the radical, the church has been marked for destruction for a long time, and it is still here.

But it is the immediate future that concerns us. And the great tragedy that will probably befall Western religion in the near future will come out of the attempt of most of its professors to maintain their churchly practices as if society remained what it was during the Victorian era. An attempt by organized religion in the West to make itself the spiritual voice of a new order of society might fail, but it would at least give the next years of life within the churches an heroic quality commensurate with their pretensions. What is likely to happen, however, is that those who have reason to fear for their personal fortunes during a period of vital change, will insist on making their churches and congregations the last citadel of their allegiance to the past. The chimes above their cathedrals will, to the end, ring out the defiance of Samuel Hoffenstein's memorable couplet:

Come weal, come woe,
My status is quo.

Not much needs to be said concerning the outlook for this sort of religion except to recognize that, statistically speaking, it is likely to be a more numerous part of the total Western scene than any other recognizable group in the

field of religion. As such, it will function as another obstruction in the path of the cohorts of change, and so as another symbol against which they will seek to rally revolutionary passion. Everything that has happened since the pre-war world began to collapse points to this probability. Consider the Russian church committing suicide rather than admit the social legitimacy of bolshevism. Or, in the case of a revolution that for the time being has swung toward the right, consider the decision of the Italian church in favor of accommodation with the secularism of Mussolini. Or the obsession of Prussian Protestantism with the hope of a Hohenzollern restoration.

Just so, when social change in vital proportions penetrates American communities, it will find the privileged classes who have formed most of the urban church constituency and the rural faithful whose education has not been sufficient to make what is going on intelligible to them, alike looking to their churches to provide a haven of refuge and defiance. And there is no reason to expect the disappearance of such religious groups until the transformation of the social order liquidates the classes who form them. That is a prospect, in America, still a long way off.

III

BUT LET US get on to other groups, since the one of which we have been speaking has no importance beyond its size and no fate beyond a passive and uncomprehending acceptance of whatever the progress of events in other fields may mete out. From this point on let us consider the future of those portions of Western religion that *are* aware of the current that is running toward social change, and that are concerned to see that the religious institution shall make whatever changes are required to keep itself a vital force.

At the present moment such groups are tormented by a sense of inadequacy. This is the most encouraging fact concerning them. For as churches grow increasingly aware that the problems of conduct and faith which the emerging order is casting up to rack men's minds are too difficult for solution in terms of the religion of the pre-war world, they become accordingly aware of the necessity for religious change. Some of them thus become reconciled to change; a few go out to seek it.

However much the reader may disagree with me at every other point, I believe that if he has any considerable knowledge of conditions within the churches, he will agree that this sense of inadequacy is already widely spread, and is growing. The study of *Recent Social Trends* just completed by the President's Research Committee employs the most imposing body of statistical data yet compiled to prove that, in the United States, while our recent boom years witnessed a substantial increase in the financial strength of the religious institution, they also witnessed a substantial loss of authority by religious ideas over the more intelligent portion of the public. Alert church leadership had become aware of this some time ago.

It is this sense of inadequacy which is producing the consciousness of tension with which the previous articles in this series have had to deal. Aware that his religion is neither giving him peace of mind in the midst of growing chaos nor showing promise of an ability to cope with and resolve the chaos itself, Western man, looking about to discover the reason, finds such elements of ordeal as we have been considering. His religion — whether formally labeled Christianity or Judaism or by any other name having importance in the West — claims to require him to conduct himself in accordance with ethical insights that involve it, and him, in growing tension at numberless points with the state, with the envioning society, and with the intellectual outlook of these days.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this sense of tension. In terms of the total number of those who regard themselves as religious people, only a handful have as yet come under its discipline. But the number is growing, and with every man to whom the experience comes it brings a crisis out of which his religion will emerge with its sense of direction radically altered. It is these changes in direction with which we are concerned. Before what cross-roads does the religious man who is convinced of the necessity for a new direction stand irresolute?

First and most certainly, he ponders the path of a new insistence on the mystical, the "spiritual," as the sole concern of religion. The preaching of the "social gospel," heard so loudly a few years ago, is derided as a perversion of religion's task, and the church is held to

be an agency which is to snatch the spirits of men away from the brutalities of life and preserve them inviolate in a mystical community which is altogether apart from the savage actualities of the bread-and-butter world.

This tendency — and it is at this moment the most prevalent tendency in the most aroused portions of the Western religious community — comes as a direct consequence of the awakening to the impossible position in which religion finds itself with reference to the social order. The realistic modern, who is also trying to hold on to religion, has in these post-war years taken a penetrating look at the nature of the social order, and has concluded that the idea of organizing this order according to the ethics of the so-called social gospel is a delusive dream. The religious leader who has been calling for the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth has been calling for something which never will be because it never can be.

Here is the reason for the swift growth of Barthianism, a theological system at which we must look with some care because it gives an indication not only of the way in which Western religion *may* react to its present ordeal but of the way in which it already actually *is* reacting. The history of Barthianism is an epitome of the experience of Western religion in the post-war world. Karl Barth and his original disciples are central Europeans whose youthful social radicalism became completely disillusioned during the war and after. Some of them retain a measure of social radicalism to this day, but they have utterly divorced their religious devotion from their social and political interests. Religion has become for them a thing to be apprehended and adored in man's inner soul, where the accommodations and even the ruthlessness which must accompany effective action in the field of mundane affairs should never penetrate.

The importance of the Barthians lies in their rejection of the notion of man's innate goodness and of the consequent inevitable development of his society into an order of complete righteousness, such as the liberal churches, with their confidence in the efficacy of suasion and education, have been promising. The Barthians look at religion's envioning society and pronounce it evil — too evil to be saved. They look at the spiritual condition of man and pronounce him damned by his own pride. They find

salvation for man when he sees his own wickedness, his own worthlessness, his own helplessness, and throws himself on the mercy of a God who is completely removed from this sordid and sin-diseased order.

There are three things which, for our present purpose, need to be pointed out concerning the Barthian theology. First, it fits the current mood. It is a theology that can be preached with fervor to the disillusioned and defeated men and women of our dismayed world. Its phrases are hauntingly reminiscent of old-time revivals, and so attract. In the second place, accordingly, it is rapidly gathering power. In Europe it is already the ascendant school of thought in Protestantism, and it is being given very respectful attention in Catholic circles. It is just gaining a foothold in this country, but it is winning adherents every day. It is likely, I think, to prove the agent that will give the final *coup de grace* to the evolutionary liberalism which has marked the advanced portion of American Protestantism. Finally, and most important fact of all, it surrenders the whole idea of making society, with its various institutions, over according to a pattern supplied by religion.

It is the last characteristic of Barthianism which will in the end disclose its inadequacy. A religion which uncovers the devilish nature of the social order may become an integral and important part of the developing revolution. But a religion which concludes that the social order is too evil to be saved, and that all that is possible is the snatching of the souls of men out of the environing evil to some inner haven of mystic rest, reduces moral striving at last to futility. For as soon as it declares that man's salvation lies completely outside the field of social responsibility, it allows man to conclude that his redemption is in no sense involved with the issue as to whether the relations between man and man are getting any better. When, therefore, the agony and anger of the underdog produces revolt, the forces of revolution will find a Barthianesque religion holding, as religion, a neutral position.

Bitter is the fate of a neutral in a revolutionary world.

IV

I HAVE written thus at length concerning Barthianism because of the real religious insight which it contains, and because it is typical of one reaction to the tension in which Western religion is finding itself. It penetrates the shallowness of the optimism which liberal religion has exhibited; it despairs at the practical impossibility of bringing society into accord with the highest spiritual insights, and it seeks to escape from the ordeal thus created by snatching its converts up into a stratum of rarified mysticism.

The same tendency operates in Buchmanism, the form of revivalism which is having such a vogue as this is written. There can be no question as to the value which Buchmanism has in forcing persons in modern society to view themselves without illusion. But Buch-

manism is infinitely more shallow than Barthianism because it continues to view society itself with complacency. Its converts may experience a mystical satisfaction which resolves for them all sense of tension in modern life. But the longer one listens to the self-satisfaction in their "sharing" (testimonies, in the vocabulary of Moody and Sankey) and so discovers their lack of perception of society's tragic hour, the more one is driven to believe that when social upheaval reaches them it will find the Buchmanites quite as unprepared, intellectually and spiritually, as the most illiterate fundamentalist exhorter in backwoods chapels.

Far more importance attaches to the strategy by which such parts of the Western religious community as Roman and Anglo-Catholicism are seeking to escape from the current dilemma. Both these bodies are permeated with an appreciation of the inequities and consequent instabilities of our present society. The Roman Catholic Church is as deeply concerned over the social outlook as any modern institution; on this point its record is more realistic



than that of most of Protestantism. Likewise Anglo-Catholicism, in which an extreme left wing is now developing which openly avows its readiness to join in a Communist revolution. But again, both these communions seek to resolve the *religious* dilemma of their adherents by lifting the religious issue completely over into the field of sacramentalism (or rather it should be said, in fairness to them, by insisting that it has always been there and must remain there) and leaving the field of social reformation to the operation of that "rough justice" of Thomas Aquinas, which may draw the religious man into the cause of change, but which equally may not.

Summed up, therefore, it seems to me that the outlook for a great portion of the Western religious community, after it has become aware of its inadequacy and the tension between its past pretensions and the actualities of society, is a withdrawal into various forms of mysticism. And many do advise the contemporary man of religion to escape into some haven of mystic devotion from whence, after the storm has passed, he may come forth with his symbols intact.

The fallacy in such advice, however, lies in the nature of the central symbol in Western religion. It is impossible, in a day when society itself must wrestle with the challenge of death, for religion to maintain the validity of its Cross unless it sets up that symbol in the heart of the social conflict. In an hour of world revolution, crucifixion is not to be hidden apart as a mystic rite for a separated few; then it becomes a common experience for all men.

V

AND THAT brings into the focus of our sight that very small part of the Western religious community which, as the tide of social revolution rises, will proclaim a religion which is part and parcel of the revolution. Men of this sort may — and in most cases will — pull away entirely from the organized religious community. Unwelcome in the congregations of the comfortably privileged, and oppressed with a sense of the hindering conservatism of the religious institution, most of these men will seek a freer air and a greater power entirely outside the church world. But that does not mean that they will lose their passion to infuse the social crisis with spiritual meaning.

Look around in the confusion of the current American scene and ask where the leadership is to come from for the change through which our society must pass. At the moment one must conclude that no adequate leadership has as yet appeared. Despite our confusion and tension there is no sign, either in organized labor, in politics, or in the various liberal and radical organizations, of any leadership that can command much of a following. But one does find the forerunners of such leadership in men of varied sorts. Such men, for instance, as Norman Thomas, with his belief that society may be made over by democratic political processes, or A. J. Muste, who turns in the direction of an educational crusade among the workers, or Scott Nearing, who seeks to point the way toward direct action. I take these three names as types only — but it is of interest to remember that two of them have come directly out of the church and that even the other, quick as he would be to reject any implication of relation with religion, discloses a sense of a moral imperative which reveals that, if the sort of Communist revolution which he advocates should transpire, there would be in it for him a recognition of moral and ethical adjustment to the world order which would guarantee a religious revival in his post-revolutionary society.

But it grows clearer all the time that there is still another minority which means to stay within the avowed religious community and to insist that the revolution be welcomed there. How many churches or congregations there will be in which these men will be permitted to labor it is impossible to forecast. Probably not many. But the less encumbered such men are with looking after the preservation of institutions, the more effective they may prove in giving expression to their insights. The *form* of religious fellowship which such men are able to preserve through the approaching storm may be exceedingly primitive, but the *fact* of that fellowship will insure the survival of the church.

An enlightening illustration of the temper of this minority that means to ride out the storm inside the church may be found in the person of Reinhold Niebuhr. Dr. Niebuhr is a professor (of *applied* Christianity, be it noted) in Union Theological Seminary of New York, and is today probably the most sought after spokesman of religion at the student centers of the East and Middle West. At the moment he is being

looked on with apprehension by many of the liberal clergy because his latest book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, betrays what they regard as a readiness to sanction a resort to violence in the pursuit of social justice, or at any rate to countenance departures from what they hold to be the orthodox religious ethic of love.

The fact is that Dr. Niebuhr, viewing society realistically, sees that it is based on coercion. Reading history, he finds that privileged groups never give up their power except when compelled to do so. His present major interest, therefore, lies in forcing the religious community to recognize the hypocrisy in which it becomes involved when it passes adverse ethical judgment on any resort to coercion by the underdog while it accepts without effective protest the coercion which the topdog — in almost every case a “good churchman” — habitually employs.

Dr. Niebuhr is concerned with an attempt to save the future of religion by enlisting religion *now* on the side of the reorganization of society, for when the battle really gets under way it will be too late. (Perhaps it is too late already.) Then the pressure of the situation will, Niebuhr thinks, force religion in on the side of reaction, and reaction's fate will attend it. Niebuhr is too much of a realist to believe that the reorganization of society, when it comes, will bring Utopia. He is as sure as Barth that the Kingdom of God will never be fully established in history. But if society is reorganized with some feeling after eternal — and unattainable — standards of righteousness, then he believes that it will be possible for religion not only to persist but to render its personal mystic services to the souls of men with a degree of persuasiveness never before attained.

The attention which is being given to Niebuhr seems to me important just now when the weakness of the older religious liberalism is becoming so apparent. For he indicates the coming of a revolutionary religious minority with genuine fighting power. He is under no illusions as to the size of the task involved in changing the social order. But he will not therefore shirk it. He is determined to show his skeptical com-

rades that religion has its part in the waging of revolution as well as in the building of the new order which comes after the old has been overthrown.

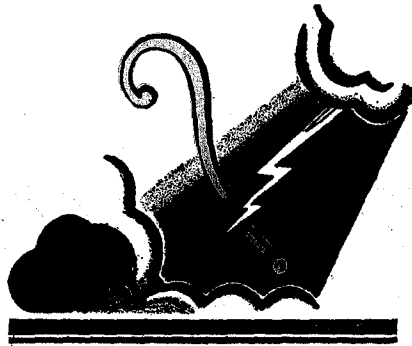
VI

ALMOST nothing has been said in all this as to the outlook in the ordeal which confronts Western religion's dogma. What will happen in respect to those basic affirmations on which the structure of Western religion has stood? How can belief in God weather the contemporary attack? How can the religious primacy of Jesus be maintained? Can the religious symbolism of the past satisfy the insights which humanity will gain during the years of “great tribulation” which lie just ahead?

Frankly, I am not able to answer these questions except in terms of my own faith, and I will not intrude it here. Let me say simply this: If I sense the mood of contemporary

life at all, the tide of belief in a “naturalistic” basis for the universe is ebbing even faster than it rose. A new supernaturalism is emerging. I greatly doubt whether any theistic argument now on the intellectual horizon will fully satisfy the examination of modern man. But I believe that, as our envolving social chaos increases, man will persist in seeking behind it for a spiritual order. In this quest I expect him to find more rather than less meaning in the faith of Jesus. For there is no religious symbolism — or mythology, if you will — quite so perfectly adapted to the tragic experiences of a revolutionary period as that of a faith which involves death that it may issue in triumph.

The Cross, it should be remembered, was originally a sign of a feared revolution. It was set up by the state at the demand of an endangered society that was the creature of a dogmatic religious orthodoxy. The return of another great revolutionary period to mankind, therefore, far from bringing about the final disappearance of this symbol, as many seem to expect, may prove the one thing needed to wrest it from the conventional impotence of centuries and to restore it once again to living meaning.



Farewell to Good Eating

by FAITH MARIS

EATING as a fine art, as well as the less defensible practice of eating for the sake of eating, is becoming more and more uncommon in Europe. In America, during the dieting decade just ended, we have become accustomed to eating fads of many kinds, but we had thought of Europe as jogging along the same old gastronomic paths — France with its subtle and elaborately simple food, served in leisurely, exquisite fashion, Germany with its rich, substantial dishes, and the lesser nations enjoying their own particular fleshpots. The old traditions of cooking and eating are, however, crumbling. The diminished quantity of food ordered in European restaurants, the decreased time spent at table, are two of the first changes to strike the visitor from overseas. Everywhere, those sections of the population which can afford to eat well are eating more sparingly.

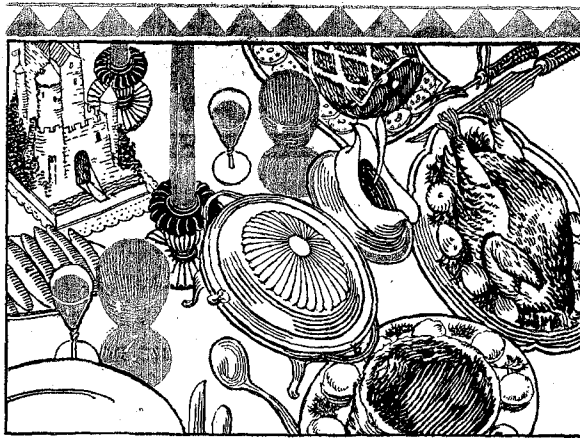
In France, stronghold of the cult of the table, the change is especially marked. The dinner hour is no longer sacred, and the two-hour luncheon period for working people has been shortened to one. Such signs as "*petit repas*" and "*repas sur la pousse*" in restaurants and cafés attract not only foreigners who are accustomed to dispatching meals with celerity, but also the French who, hitherto, have veiled the function of eating with a certain formality. The great number of casual eating places indicate that the Frenchman is succumbing to the snack meal, the bite picked up in a hurry between other and more important engagements. They suggest also — these crowded cafés, *bistrot*s, *brasseries*, and *crémeries* — that

the working man and woman are not going home at noon to share the family repast. True, they do not eat standing, as many New Yorkers do; they have a two- or three-course meal and take a good half-hour over it; but for France this is speed and simplicity. In Berlin automats have been introduced to hasten the eating process, and cafeterias are common. Those pleasant oases in the working day, the "second breakfast" and the afternoon *jause*, are to-day being omitted in Germany and Austria.

Many factors have been at work to bring about this new casualness toward food in countries where it has always been a major interest. Scarcity, first of all. During the lean years of the war, frugality and abstemiousness

were obligatory in France and Germany. The habits acquired then seem to have carried over into times of greater plenty, and have now become fixed. It is altogether likely that people have discovered they were better off with less food. Statisticians are to-day informing us that the two or three years of deprivation in the United States have improved the national health.

However true this may be, we do know that the cold hand of scarcity has stretched out over the world's dining table, removing this or that delicacy and superfluous course. For many years, too, the chill hand of chemistry has been at work. Nutritional experts and doctors have been declaring for nearly a generation that most people are overfed. American women were, I believe, the first to take these announcements seriously. With the advent of the



The Groaning Board

Drawings by I. Doskow