

Behaviorism in Religion

ACCORDING to Mr. Charles S. Macfarland, Secretary of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, the recent editorial in the *New Republic* entitled *War and Christian Ethics* "misrepresents the spirit and action of the Protestant churches of America through their authorized denominational assemblies and through their common federal body." The evidence with which he sustains this charge consists of resolutions and declarations in favor of peace passed by different church conferences before the war, before the United States entered the war and since the end of the war. Evidence of this kind does not in my opinion invalidate the *New Republic's* contentions. On the contrary Mr. Macfarland's letter is itself an illustration of the preconceptions and the illusions which prevent many Protestant clergymen from understanding why Christianity and the Christian churches have done so little to uproot war as one of the essential institutions and vocations of the Christian peoples.

The *New Republic* attributed the failure of the churches to uproot war to the want of integrity in Christian ethics, as practiced and interpreted by the vast majority of Christians. This criticism may or may not be justified, but Mr. Macfarland does not answer it by calling attention to resolutions passed by denominational assemblies of the Protestant churches and their federal body. He names these resolutions "actions," but they are not actions; they are pious and impotent expressions of opinion. They have little or no effect after they are uttered on the behavior of Christian peoples. The member of a Christian church who ignores them is not considered any less orthodox or reputable. The organization of the modern world provides for war as part of its official economy. Certain results which governments and classes have to accomplish they cannot accomplish without war. The psychology and morals of the great majority of Christians are the reflection of these necessities rather than of the life and teaching of Jesus. If the Christian churches seek to eradicate an institution of this kind merely by passing resolutions against it or even by realizing their pacifist convictions in individual conscientious protests, the Christian kingdom of God becomes a kingdom of words and intentions. It is disqualified from exercising effective authority over either individual or social life as a whole.

I do not wish to disparage the sincerity, the unselfishness and the devotion which the group of liberal Christians, represented in the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, are bringing to the task of giving political and social reality to what they take to be the truth of Christian ethics. But their conduct of the enterprise condemns it to ultimate futility. The Christian ministry cannot bring peace on earth and good will to men until its members are agreed upon the meaning and the power of the Christian Gospel as a way of life. In order to establish a living connection between Christianity and peace they will have to consider much more radically than they have yet done what in the light of contemporary knowledge they must conceive Christian truth to be and how its faithful adherents can penetrate life with it.

At present the Federal Council conceives Christian truth

as a spiritual impulse which they can read into the conduct of Christian peoples by propaganda. They are undertaking an ardent and far-reaching campaign to persuade a larger number of professing Christians to believe in a "warless world." They are circulating a great deal of carefully and intelligently prepared religious exhortation by which they expect to educate their brethren into a vital conviction of the affiliation between peace and Christian truth. They believe they are succeeding, and no doubt they do succeed in the sense that they make converts to their opinions. But it is doubtful just what they accomplish by conversions of this kind. They should first ask themselves how much of a drag opinion has upon behavior—upon the behavior not only of their converts but of themselves and ourselves and all selves in the year 1922 of the Christian era. If opinion and particularly religious opinion has very little drag on behavior, their whole apparatus for the transmission of religious truth and the imparting of religious education is suspended in the air. Yet the question remains not only unanswered but practically unconsidered.

Ever since men have believed in their possession of a sacred truth which, if they were faithful to it, would redeem their lives, they have labored to invent some satisfactory way of communicating this priceless possession to the non-believer both of their own and future generations. The Christian churches have tried more tenaciously and successfully to keep Christian truth alive than has any other church and they have used at one time or another a multitude of methods. But the method of communication by word has gradually gained upon the others; and since the abandonment at the end of the religious wars of conversion by compulsion, it has enjoyed almost a monopoly. In the beginning communication by word meant chiefly sermons, but since the invention of the printing press the written word has gained steadily in availability. For several centuries the most popular product of the printing press was the Bible, and during this period, the propagation of Christian truth by sermons, pamphlets and books flourished and seemed justified by its fruits. But in the meantime the amount and the importance of profane truth which was also communicated by words most prodigiously increased. Although the Christian clergy do not realize it, the increasing volume and authority of profane truth and the competition for attention and allegiance which it sets up against religious truth has altered profoundly the conditions under which Christians can communicate an effective belief in the life and teaching of their Master.

Natural science, technology, industrialism, education and democracy have during the last century and a half multiplied a thousand-fold the currency of opinion. It has become an increasingly popular currency, issued by many different authorities and serving in all its issues and all its denominations more or less useful purposes. But the feverish activity of the printing presses of opinion is not an unmixed blessing. Science, nationalism and democracy have popularized the currency of belief, but they have also inflated and debased it. For a conviction or an opinion is a coin whose value depends ultimately on our ability to exchange it not for other currency but for the goods

of life; and at present the value of opinions in other special denominational currencies is high and in goods extremely low.

It is uncertain as well as low. The quotations for different issues of opinions fluctuate from day to day. There was a time when people who possessed what they took to be peculiarly precious opinions tended to hoard them. Now they spend them for fear of a further diminution in value before tomorrow. The idea that any opinion is precious enough to deserve hoarding, that some sacred opinions may, if sufficiently cherished and informed, become convertible into individual and social fulfillment, does not exist as a general motive for conduct. The modern world is speculating in the comparative value of different issues of opinion instead of seeking convictions which may be exchangeable for something peculiarly valuable in life. A Christian body which undertakes to propagate Christian truth by propaganda is not vindicating its authority over human beings; it is swelling the volume of the prevailing speculation in ideas.

Those Christians who believe in the salutary power of Christian truth have implicitly assumed an obligation to convince the incredulous and secular modern world of the unique value of their religious opinions as a positive clue to the good life. They will not win serious converts by passing anti-war resolutions or by distributing sermons about human brotherhood and the Golden Rule. The publication of tracts on the church in a warless world on the front page of every American newspaper on every day for five years would do little or nothing to build up among Americans the craving and the power to imitate Christ. Such methods are far better adapted to the circulation of shibboleths, apologetics, half truths and essays in deceptive rationalization than they are to the propagation of a religious truth which is not fully believed unless it is lived. Christian propagandists propose to "sell" Christianity to the American people in a way not essentially different from the way in which during the war the government sold Liberty Bonds. But it is only one among several alternative interpretations of Christianity which they can disseminate by such a method, and even if the convert is hypnotized into repeating the words, he will still lack any sufficient psychological preparation for reading them into life. To believe in the salutary importance of a formative religious truth in the sense of proposing to penetrate life with it calls for a spiritual hospitality, flexibility, continuity and concentration which cannot survive in an atmosphere of cheap opinion and which requires for its nurture a prolonged and stupendous educational discipline.

The abounding increase of the currency of opinion which tempts the practical modern man to accomplish by propaganda a result which can only be accomplished by religious education is merely one aspect of an insidious and formidable assault on the integrity of human nature which the distracted and disorganized secularism of the last one hundred and fifty years has brought in its train. Modern science was born during a twilight of religious passion and education. The state had succeeded the church as the positive organizing and binding ingredient in society. It emphasized physical order rather than moral values. The control which man obtained over nature by the advance in natural science passed into the possession of people who had no religious vision of human nature as a whole and no interest in its fulfillment. The Christian clergy were wrestling with internal doubts and scruples. They

permitted practically without protest the appropriation by a small class of politically and economically privileged people of an unprecedented sway over the lives of the mass of mankind and an unprecedented ability to compel insubordinate and indifferent people to follow their leads and obey their commands. The power of this class rests ultimately on force, but usually its members accomplish their purposes by exploiting the debased currency of opinion. They erect altars to the political or economic gods which suit their needs. They conduct propaganda on behalf of their new polytheism so as to close the popular mind to the appeal of other gods. Their object is to persuade the people to worship as sacred and sufficient a particular state or one particular form of property. But this God-state which refuses to recognize any subordination of political to religious authority, even though it hides behind the catchwords of democracy and liberty, soon degenerates into a deification of physical law and order, while the property-God is merely a reincarnation of the old demon of class selfishness which has so often and under so many disguises asked for human worship. Yet these two gods and the counter-gods of anarchy and communism which by reaction their worship has set up among the revolutionists constitute the actual religions of a secularized society which is given over to the accumulation and the exchange of particular economic, political and moral goods. They furnish the realities which focus and direct the lives of modern human beings. They explain the drift towards economic conflict, social disintegration, psychological dissociation and moral anarchy of which the existing plight of the so-called Christian peoples is the witness.

I see no way out of this morass except through the new affirmation of Christian truth as a way of life and the solemn belief in it by Christian peoples as more formative and sacred than any of the special gods of natural science, politics, economics and the world. But Christian truth in its popular expression presents grave obstacles to its own re-affirmation. The modern mind revolts against the traditional methods which the Christian ministry has used to exalt religious authority. It can not accept a supposed verbally inspired text as any sufficient reason for believing in the sacred authority of Christian Gospel any more than it can accept the Pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth. The only valid test of salutary truth is not its miraculous origin and transmission but its ability to bestow on men and women who believe in it enough to live by it the will and the knowledge to fulfill and ameliorate their lives. A regenerate Christianity must supply both non-Christians and pretended Christians with some better reason than they now have for following in the footsteps of Christ. They will not believe that by the imitation of Christ they may enter into possession of a truth which will set them free and make them whole, unless they can fortify the belief by reasons and methods which are being vindicated in experience.

Christian clergymen are reluctant to take the two radical but costly steps which will liberate Christianity from its present subjectivism and its bondage to propaganda and enable them to use Christian opinions as an introduction to a Christian life. They cannot escape from their present impotence until they congregate in large numbers on the platform of a common interpretation of Christian truth and a common understanding of how allegiance to it can transform human nature. It is fantastic for them to call on Christianity in its present distracted condition to heal the dissensions which are rending modern

civilization. Before they invoke Christianity to get rid of war among classes and nations they must first deal with their own dissensions in doctrinal conviction and ethical outlook. They and their forbears have debased the currency of religious truth, first by multiplying and over emphasizing the importance of doctrinal and ethical specialties and then, when later it became convenient to do so, by acting as if these divergent interpretations of Christianity had ceased to be of any importance. Their reason for clinging to their specialties in dogma and organization for some purposes and ignoring them for others is only too obvious. They will not pay the heavy cost of finding a better substitute. They cannot agree upon a common interpretation without asking themselves some very radical questions. Their creeds, morals, doctrines and intellectual outlook are derived from a pre-naturalistic age. In order to re-interpret Christianity they must square accounts with modern science and particularly with the science of human nature.

The calamities of the existing world are subjecting them to a searching test. Modern civilization is cracking for want of a religious truth which can earn the allegiance of men by its ability, if voluntarily accepted, to liberate and integrate human life. Christianity claims to possess this virtue and might possess it if the Christian ministry can reach a common interpretation of their faith. But they will seek it in vain merely by writing off their domestic differences one from another. Those differences derive chiefly from the obsolete ideas and knowledge with which popular Christian ethics and dogmas are overlaid. The churches must combine the task of wiping out their differences one from another with the task of coming to terms with modern science. The modern world is the creation of natural science and technology. No religion whose vision of the truth disregards or violates the standards and the achievements of secular knowledge can penetrate its life or modify its conduct.

Surely Christian clergymen to whom the imitation of Christ is the essence of Christianity should welcome the test. The attempt to comply with it will remove the existing obstacles to the transformation of Christianity from a doubtful creed or institution into a more or less authoritative way of life. Christianity as a consequence of its association with a crude science and a barbarous political and social system has for centuries been seeking in vain to domesticate itself in an alien world. No wonder that it failed. But in the course of failure it has learned certain indispensable and valuable lessons. The Christian clergy have learned the futility of propagating their faith and seeking uniformity in its interpretation by compulsion. They have sought ever since the end of the religious wars to disseminate the Christian truth by persuasion and to reach by discussion a common interpretation of it. They have made an illuminating attempt, but they are still a long way from success. They will never succeed unless they start with a different idea of the tests they must satisfy in order to demonstrate the truth of the Christian Gospel. They must be able to demonstrate, as they are now unable to demonstrate, that the men and women who imitate Christ will really start on a journey towards the liberation and integration of their own natures.

That is the ultimate reason why at any cost Christianity must enter into a treaty with modern science. If it can purge itself of its unscientific associations and ally itself with a body of knowledge which is beginning to under-

stand the world and man and man's place in the world, it should come into possession of a truth and a method which will enable it to vindicate the Christian way of life. A Christianity which is to meet the needs of modern civilization must be capable of contributing to the regeneration of the individual and society. Yet it cannot contribute to the betterment of human behavior without reforming the popular institutional Christianity of today. Formidable as the task is, we believe the Christian ministry can undertake it with a sufficient chance of success if only they will adjust their minds to its necessity. Their chance of success is born of the profound congruity between the conception of human nature revealed by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago and the conception of human nature which is now obtaining year by year, as the result of scientific investigation, increasing authority and acquiescence.

According to Jesus Christ human beings, unregenerate as they are in appearance, should be conceived as potentially regenerate. Human nature is essentially modifiable. In spite of a conflict embedded deep in its make-up, it is capable of an ultimate integrity of vision and conduct. Its possible regeneracy endows human personality with a unique quality. If we are to live in our relations with other human beings according to the counsels of the real truth, we must begin by assuming the essential sacredness of human nature, the accidental character of its immediate and occasional unregeneracy, the virtue of candidly confessing and understanding our shortcomings and the power of the Christian faith, after confession and repentance, to bring atonement (integrity) and regeneration (fulfillment) to erring human beings. Now modern science, like Christianity, is coming to see human nature as a combination of actual unregeneracy and possible regeneracy. We consist of warring elements which from the point of view of moral integrity appear at first to be fortuitous, irreconcilable and hopeless. But this irreconcilability is in part an illusion. The human mind is essentially an instrument of adjustment. Psychology and anthropology find increasing reasons for believing in the desirable modifiability of human life under the influence not merely of natural selection but of creative intelligence. It is rapidly becoming an achieved scientific truth that by virtue of a method, in which the outlook and the contrivances of the individual and social mind play a decisive part, the modification of human nature in the sense both of its corruption and its improvement is entirely possible.

Whether it is to be corruption rather than improvement depends chiefly upon the extent to which the modern civilized peoples will accept and practice as a necessary religious hypothesis or faith the Christian conception of the sacredness of human personality and confirm this religious faith by using their increasing knowledge of human behavior to give reality to it. They cannot bring about the needed regeneration as a result merely of studying human nature and learning more about its composition and ways. For human nature is actually unregenerate and only possibly regenerate. It will continue to be actually unregenerate except in so far as it affirms as an actuality its future regeneracy. Increasing knowledge and experience can never entirely vindicate this affirmative faith. The needed affirmation in advance of experience is what men mean by religion. As religion it can summon to its assistance the unique resources in symbolism, discipline, concentration and intellectual passion which will enable it to purge, renew and possess the human soul.

Yet it is equally true that an insufficiently informed

religious affirmation, no matter what the concentration and passion of belief which it inspires and no matter how beautifully and persuasively it is unfolded in symbols, will become in the long run sterile. The permanent fertility of a religious faith demands an artful and sophisticated adjustment to the world as men know it. Modern science is just beginning to supply the knowledge of human behavior in its relation to the world which will ultimately place at the disposal of Christian religion and education a new ability to give reality in life to its affirmation of human regeneracy. The Christian thinkers have always craved and frequently believed that they had attained a knowledge of this kind. The Benedictine monk, the Franciscan friar, the Puritan mystic all practiced specific rules of life which for a time imposed themselves on thousands of Christians as the only authentic and well-informed way of human fulfillment. But these moral innovators really did not and considering the condition of contemporary science could not know enough to find the way. Since the decline of Puritanism it seems as if the modern religious consciousness had ceased to feel the need of learning how to live and of teaching others to live. It is satisfied with uttering victorious words and passing victorious resolutions. Yet for the first time in human history science is endowing a religion of human brotherhood with the material out of which it may be possible to fashion an art and discipline of humane living.

Up to date neither the priests nor the philosophers have realized how much the reenforcement of religious truth by science may mean for human fulfillment. Modern science is using its new knowledge only to increase the control of man over nature and of some men over other men. But some day it will dawn on Christian ministers and on lay evangelists that the new knowledge, just in so far as it penetrates the secrets of human nature, can also be used to increase the control of man over society and over his behavior, being and destiny. The larger the knowledge of human nature the more trustworthy the art and discipline of life which ethical investigators and inventors can place at the disposal of a religious community for the better realization of its conviction of the sacredness and regeneracy of human personality. It will be the business of religious leaders to teach men how really to lead a good life, which is something they now lack the knowledge and the disposition to do. If they succeed one of the results of their success will be the creation of a quality of human life incompatible with an institution like war which receives its only sanction from human unregeneracy.

HERBERT CROLY.

The Alchemist

I burned my life, that I might find
A passion wholly of the mind,
Thought divorced from eye and bone
Ecstasy come to breath alone.
I broke my life, to seek relief
From the flawed light of love and grief.

With mounting beat, the utter fire
Charred existence and desire.
It died low, ceased its sudden thresh.
I had found unmysterious flesh
Not the mind's avid substance, still
Passionate beyond the will.

LOUISE BOGAN.

The Bandwagon

ARMENIANS, YOU DISTURB US

Mr. Appleby of New Jersey laid upon the Clerk's desk a—

Petition of the Quiet Hour Club, of Metuchen, New Jersey, urging the United States Government to protest against the withdrawal of the French troops at present protecting the Armenians.—*The Congressional Record*.

MR. HIRSHFIELD MAKES HISTORY

(Incidents in a recent public hearing, conducted by New York's Commissioner of Accounts, in connection with his investigation of anti-American, patriot-belittling propaganda in school history books:)

Commissioner of Accounts Hirshfield . . . traced the hero-scoring habit of some modern historians to the influence of "the Rockefeller crowd," which sought, he said, to keep the common people ignorant and their minds undeveloped in order to check the increase of brain workers and conserve man power for the mills and factories. . . .

Williams Pickens, a negro speaker, demanded that history confess plainly that the first man to be killed in the Boston Riot was Christmas Adams, a negro; that 5,000 negroes fought under George Washington, and that they played important parts in the Civil War and the Great War. The negro was defrauded of the respect due to him, when his deeds for the sake of the country were suppressed.

"Pardon me for interrupting you," said Commissioner Hirshfield, who is also conducting a hearing on birth control, "but I would like to ask you if the colored people advocate birth control?" . . .

No speaker appeared to defend any of the books which were attacked. Mr. Hirshfield congratulated those who attended the meeting on their courage.—*The New York Times*.

FOR UNCLE SAM, AFTER MEALS

"Think of pleasant things, like low rents, cheap gasoline, full coal bins, auto rides on smooth roads, no taxes to pay, a trip around the world, plenty of good money, and no pessimists who as the Master said to Judas, 'have the poor always with ye,' and blame God for it."—*From The Pill, "Not Bitter; Easy to Take," "a simply home remedy for Economic Flu, Industrial Collywobbles and Political Excrescences," and published by the Public Improvement League, Limited.*

GENTLE RAIN, LEGISLATIVE, ACTUAL, AND PRACTICAL
(The District of Columbia Appropriation Bill is before the House. Mr. Focht of Pennsylvania:)

" . . . So it is with the snowstorms that come. You cannot control them, and if we are a little patient, as well we may be in all the events of life, something more powerful than we administer the remedy, and here it comes, and the glory of the sunshine takes away all the cause for complaint. You really have not had time to complain. You did not get in yesterday in time to offer your complaints. You waited until it was too late and until the sun had melted the snow, and it had gone out to the salted sea, to be returned again in the pure snow of the winter and the gentle rain of the spring."

(Five minutes later. The same bill is still being discussed. Mr. Focht of Pennsylvania remarks that "we are discussing the legislative, actual and practical features of it.")—*The Congressional Record*.