

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# The Mental Climate of To-day

## Lines of Approach to the Modern Mind

BY A HEADMASTER

WHEN a Schoolmaster, the raw material of whose work has mostly been boys aged thirteen to nineteen, speaks about the mental climate of to-day, it may seem that his limited experience renders his comments irrelevant for adults. Nevertheless, I believe this deduction to be inaccurate; for the fact is that this age is post-Christian by at least three generations, which means that many parents are now living in much the same climate of thought and practice as their children, particularly in relation to morality and religion. Thus it is often found to be true that where a child exhibits an amoral standard of thought and practice, the encouragement to that thought or practice has actually come from the parents, either deliberately or by suggestion: for example, the child who exhibits no sense of shame in stealing has behind him in many cases parents who equally have no sense of shame in underhand practices, whether in the home or in business.

A recent book thus describes the outward signs of this post-Christian age: "Intellectual and spiritual disorder, and, in its train, a creeping paralysis of moral standards, as the beliefs that in the past created and supported them grow progressively weaker—so one might diagnose the sickness of our generation."<sup>1</sup> I suppose that most Christians would agree with that statement, though some of us may perhaps feel that it does not go far enough. But while most Christians would probably agree with the statement, I think it is also true that many Christians, probably just because they are Christians, grounded in a moral code based upon Christian beliefs, do not realize the extent to which the paralysis of modern standards has gone, nor does their analysis of our modern situation go deep enough. We are apt, are we not, simply to condemn the moral standards of to-day, to call them low and sinful and all the rest, and leave it at that.

Let us then try and get under the skin of the present situation, so to speak; to get inside the mental climate of to-day. I am, of course, using those words, for this occasion, in their rather narrow sense of referring to the religious, and therefore also to the moral, situation of our age. In my attempt at analysis I propose to approach the answer in the following indirect way.

### I

I do not believe modern youth is irreligious in the sense that young people are atheist or even agnostic in their outlook. In actual fact, I find a greater hunger and searching for God than I ever found before

<sup>1</sup> *Education and the Spirit of the Age*, by Sir Richard Livingstone (Clarendon Press). I am indebted to this admirable little book not only for some of the ideas contained in the first part of this paper, but also for the two quotations from John Ruskin and Bishop Berkeley.

the late war, and that statement is as true in my experience of boys who come from homes in which religion is not practised, as of boys who have got either a smattering or a sound basis of religious training behind them. But I do often find modern youth irreligious in lacking "a sense of the numinous". In other words, awe and reverence and mystery are not words or ideas that are characteristic of our age; and yet of course the sense of awe and reverence is at the heart of every religious instinct; without that sense a man is fundamentally irreligious in his outlook. The fact is that modern scientific thought has to a large extent over the past fifty years analysed the sense of awe and mystery out of existence, and young people of to-day are heirs to this analytical climate. They have been brought up, like their parents, to believe that scientific knowledge is all-important, that increasing knowledge means increasing power, and that generation by generation man is becoming more and more master of the natural elements; all of which is doubtless true up to a point. But Ruskin was quite right in pointing out that "the tree of knowledge is not the tree of life", and it is because the last three generations have progressively swamped the elemental spirit of worship by an increasing worship of knowledge that the spirit of our time is so fundamentally irreligious. When a man thinks that he can explain everything in life he has come to the point of explaining everything away, including the sense of mystery on which worship is based.

It is precisely for this reason that to-day people are not on the whole antagonistic to religion; they simply regard it as unreal and irrelevant. Let us put the thing in personal terms. God and Christ to-day are largely regarded as irrelevant, because the scientific outlook upon life, and the scientific analysis of life, has taught men to regard concrete and material standards as being the only relevant standards. A thing has value in life, and is pursued as such, if you can touch it and use it.

There is nothing new in this, and Christians have protested down the ages against this view of life. Listen again to John Ruskin, for example, in *Modern Painters* :

"No changing of place at a hundred miles an hour, nor making of stuffs a thousand yards a minute, will make us one whit stronger, happier or wiser. There was always more in the world than men could see, walked they ever so slowly; they will see it no better for going fast. . . . As for being able to talk from place to place, that is, indeed, well and convenient; but suppose you have, originally, nothing to say! We shall be obliged at last to confess, what we should long ago have known, that the really precious things are thought and sight, not pace. It does a bullet no good to go fast; and a man, if he be truly a man, no harm to go slow; for his glory is not at all in going, but in being".

That is not the view of this age. Life as such, the life of man, the life of "being", holds little mystery and little glory. How can it, when men have lost the basic sense of awe and reverence? And I submit that this is the mental climate of to-day, something imbedded deeply in the human system, an outlook which determines the behaviour of men in their relations with one another. I am afraid it

is also true that many Christians are sometimes tainted in their behaviour with something of the same mental outlook, though they do not always know it or appreciate it.

Now if this broad diagnosis is true, it affects our view of quite a lot of things connected with our religious practices. It is bound to affect our presentation of the gospel, not only in what one might call pure evangelism ; it will surely affect our training of the young in public worship and in prayer ; it will affect our methods of preparation for baptism and confirmation and marriage ; and it will certainly affect the terms in which we write for this post-Christian world.

## II

I now pass on to what is in many ways, to me at least, the more interesting half of my subject, namely, the lines of approach. How should we tackle this problem ?

First of all, I want again to suggest that it is no good simply damning the mental climate, as so many of us who are preachers and writers are inclined or tempted to do. The negative method of attack upon this modern form of irreligion is next to useless. What is the relevance of the adjective "sinful", for example, in reference to modern materialism? Many of the words which we use as Christians are often largely unintelligible to the modern mind, which, I repeat, for three generations past has come to think in certain terms, which to us as Christians deny God and exalt man, but which to them, the non-Christians, are simply the natural result of the scientific analysis of life which has been going on for a long time past. We must be more subtle than that. We must first understand the modern climate, and for many Christians that means a lot of hard study and a lot of hard thinking, in getting to know the minds of our non-Christian neighbours. And then we must if possible utilise those things in the modern climate of thought which can help to create a Christian mental climate in the minds of those we wish to draw to Christ. This is the positive form of attack, as opposed to the negative ; to undermine the enemy's position by finding what looks like the common ground in his position and mine, and then using that common ground to educate him into my position and my climate of thought. When I have got him thinking in the terms of my climate of thought, I have got an honest chance of leading him to Christ by conversion. It seems to me that, whether wittingly or unwittingly, we tend to forget that this was the way most of the early original thinkers of the Christian Church set about their work, when they found themselves up against a pagan world in the earliest days of the spreading Church ; they had to try and change the *pagan* mental climate of their day into a *Christian* mental climate. The intellectual and theological thought of St. Paul is a vivid example of how this can be done.

Let me give some practical examples of what I mean by finding common ground between the positions of irreligion and religion, and using that common ground to produce this basic sense of awe, which is a prerequisite for Christian teaching if modern man is to be led to Christ. In passing, I would call attention to the fact that our forefathers usually called this prerequisite a sense of sin. In my sub-

mission, you cannot usually get a sense of sin without the basic sense of awe ; in other words, nowadays you must dig down into the human spirit one layer deeper than our forefathers normally had to dig when they set about the conversion of men and women. To the average young person to-day, the word sin as a theological term is initially quite meaningless, and the lack of meaning in the word springs from a mental training which has largely removed the sense of awe, out of which the sense of sin springs.

### III

Let me turn now to practical examples of lines along which this problem can be tackled.

First of all, take the external format of our public worship. I am deliberately by-passing the initial problem of getting young people into church, partly because I feel that most parishes have still got fairly flourishing Sunday schools ; in other words, they have got the material to work upon, and we must start with the young if we are to tackle the irreligion of our time seriously. The probability is that if we can successfully tackle our young people we shall also draw in the previous generation as well. Consider the format of our public worship along this line.

This is an irreligious age. Christians and non-Christians agree that it is also an irreverent age ; it is so, precisely for the reason that reverence for man springs out of reverence for God. For the very reason that it is irreverent, it is an age also lacking in discipline and in good manners—a natural chain of sequences. But it is only lacking in discipline and good manners where these virtues refer to relationships between persons. In less personal and individualistic situations the age is not undisciplined. For example, in the army, in a trade union, in a cadet force, in a boys' club, in a football team, the sense of discipline is strong, and is mostly enjoyed, all the more when it is enforced by a respected leader. A small boy who nowadays will even be rude to a police sergeant in the street will nevertheless obey without hesitation or backchat the orders of his gang leader, or even of his adult leader in a good Boys' Club. Why is this ? Surely it is because discipline spells security ; and while religion alone, with its basic element of awe and worship and wonder, can bring a man to that joyous sense of individual and personal security which springs from a right relationship between God and himself, where this *personal* security is lacking young people will nevertheless seek security in other ways, because it is such a fundamental demand of the human spirit.

Here is a piece of common ground ; and the Christian teacher and evangelist should try to use the more impersonal corporate discipline, which is present in young people, to create the individualistic personal discipline, out of which there can spring reverence for God and for man, and thereby Christian worship and true religion.

Now it is a fact that if we insist upon an external discipline in our public worship, especially from the children, we shall find that not only is this imposed discipline not resented, because it is something which the child understands within its own modern climate of

experience, but we shall also find that out of that imposed discipline in external things there begins to spring a sense of reverence and awe and of the numinous. In other words, we shall find that a religious climate is being created in which it is easier to teach and to preach the gospel.

This is because, first, there is an unconscious seeping-in to the child's mind of a cognate idea to his own, the idea of disciplined respect ; and secondly, there is a careful and deliberate sowing of related ideas which can go on throughout the act of disciplined worship, ideas which are more nearly related to the Christian climate of thought. For example, if we want to teach a child who lacks any idea of reverence for God some sense of awe and wonder, out of which spring respect and reverence, we should be deliberately stressing this practice of discipline in church, and on the basis of it constantly reiterating that in church we are respectful to God, who is present in that place, just as we should be respectful to mother or father or anyone else who commands affection and respect. The higher idea of reverence for God will become linked up, by the constant reiteration and practice of discipline, with the lower form of respect for man.

#### IV

There are other pieces of common ground which can be utilized.

First of all, ideas are nowadays very commonly implanted in the mind through the eye, whether of adults or of children, by the material means of the cinema or pictures or models, and there is much teaching also by signs and symbolism. Symbolism is a characteristic of our age, but the symbolism is usually simple. This is a challenge to us to work out a simple evangelical symbolism which will support our teaching and our witness, and especially in the public worship in which children take part. As the young are so used to teaching aided by picture and symbolism in the classroom, in the cinema, and in places where they meet for work and play, we have got common ground here which can be used to produce the sense of worship which is at present so lacking. I am quite sure that the constant and deliberate use of picture-method and symbolism is to-day by far the best instrument for explanation of the real meaning of the sacraments, if it is worked out systematically. I speak outside my field of experience, to a large extent ; nevertheless, I am sure that this is true. Moreover, it is practically a new field for evangelicals, being largely territory which I suggest we have been too timid to explore for fear of falling into certain errors which we condemn. I cannot see the sense of leaving so useful a piece of common ground unexplored to-day.

Secondly, modern educational methods demand a little at a time spread over a long period. We have learnt a lot in the last thirty years or so about the instruction of the young, though I would hasten to add that very many of the basic ideas in so-called modern techniques in teaching method can be found perfectly illustrated in the teaching method of our Lord, and in this as in many other things He is the most modern of moderns. He knew far more about these things than we shall ever know ; and not only so, He was a perfect practitioner of the teaching art.

Take for example the generally recognised fact that mental concentration in any real sense is difficult or even impossible for a child for longer than ten-fifteen minutes at a stretch, and then study the teaching method of our Lord as shown by the parable of the Sower. Some would say that mental concentration upon a new idea is also probably difficult or impossible even for an adult for much longer than that period, when the idea happens to be a religious idea which we are trying to get across. This is surely relevant to our preparation of the young for confirmation, and to our teaching in public worship, and to a host of other things, if we are really going to get across to the modern world the truths of the Christian faith. Here at any rate is more common ground, though it relates to method rather than thought.

Thirdly, this is a dramatic age, and the young are to-day easily led to an appreciation of such things as good music or ballet. Furthermore, the way they indulge in their sports, the modern cult of the pictorial magazine, and the way it is produced, the science of advertisement on hoardings, the great youth gatherings and rallies to which young people flock : all these and many other things are signs of a highly dramatic element in the mental climate of to-day.

I submit that this again is common ground, which must be utilized to get the evangel across. I think the ground provides a great opportunity for evangelicals especially, in view of the dramatic nature of their particular insights. And surely it is true that this dramatic element in the modern climate presents us with an opportunity to use music as a *teaching* medium in public worship much more effectively than we do. Another thought may be of interest ; in my experience young people generally seem to prefer the services of Holy Communion and Evensong to the service of Matins, and of all services of the Church they prefer that of Holy Communion. I submit that this is partly because the service of Holy Communion answers to the dramatic sense in them.

Here again is common ground, which can be utilized to produce that basic sense of awe and worship for which we must strive.

Finally, there seems to me to be a kind of "No-Man's Land" between the Christian and non-Christian climates of thought, a piece of territory which at the moment is held by neither side, but is potentially the most useful springboard from which the Christian can launch his attack with the Christian gospel.

I am referring to the fact that the pervading spirit of materialism to-day, with the ceaseless round of "doing" which it creates, has left a vacuum in the human spirit ; inevitably so, because human personalities are so made that they cannot for ever go without the element of meditation and silence in the soul. Bishop Berkeley once wrote : " Whatever the world thinks, he who hath not much meditated upon God, the human mind and the *summum bonum*, may possibly make a thriving earthworm, but will certainly make a sorry patriot and a sorry statesman ". A great many people these days are living in this condition of the thriving earthworm, a direct result of the spirit of modern materialism.

This vacuum in the human spirit is itself creating an unconscious longing which is an opportunity for the Christian gospel ; this longing

is a longing for silence, for peace in the soul, a longing we sometimes call restlessness, whose first-born child is frustration—so universal a feature of our age; a longing which is seen in the very rush and scramble to drown it.

There is practically nothing in our statutory forms of Anglican worship to fill this vacuum, this need for silence, through planned meditation. I submit that this constitutes a challenge and a great opportunity for the evangelical, who should in principle not be hide-bound by liturgical tradition. I know that various forms of meditation have been produced, but they are usually for Christian people; my contention is that we are not using the opportunity for the non-Christian, or more particularly (since I have young people especially in mind) we are not using this opportunity to train the young and the susceptible to an understanding of God and of Christ, and of all that the Christian gospel means, by capturing this vacuum of the spirit. I know from experience that much fruit can spring from this particular piece of uncultivated ground.

## V

In closing, I wish to stress that I have been talking about *lines of approach*; I have not been talking about a new gospel, or a new presentation of the gospel. As I see it, people (and particularly the young) are living in a certain climate of thought to-day which we as Christians find it very hard to understand, precisely because we are Christians; it is something foreign to our experience and upbringing. This constitutes a new situation, to which there must be new lines of approach on our part, first in order to understand it, and secondly in order to tackle it and get inside it, under the skin of it. But the heart of the Christian gospel remains the same; all roads must lead to Christ, if they are to lead anywhere at all, and all our new thinking and our new practices, if they are to get us anywhere, must get us to the point where people meet Jesus Christ in personal encounter. I have a feeling that much of our Christian thinking to-day does not lead to that point of personal encounter, simply because it does not fit the climate in which a post-Christian generation is thinking. St. Paul got the Christian message across, as also did St. John pre-eminently in the fourth gospel, by thinking and presenting Christ in terms which men understood in their day. In precisely the same way to-day, we must take pains to understand and utilize the modern climate of thought if we are to make real to people the Christ who is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever".