The Secular Reaction and Its Legacy

BY "HISTORICUS"

A FREQUENT argument of agnostics is expressed thus: "Christians may have been responsible for some of the social reforms of the last century, but they did not go far enough. Nor, as man developed in wisdom and experience, was their faith any longer necessary or even desirable". In support of this it is asserted that though Shaftesbury, Booth, Barnardo and the others did much to alleviate the condition of the masses, the true leaders of Reform were the agnostics—Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Bernard Shaw and the Fabians. The Labour Movement, as it grew, shed its Christianity. Therefore, claims the agnostic, whatever his politics, Christianity may be part of the truth, but it is not itself *the* Truth.

Twenty years ago or more, in the nineteen twenties and 'thirties, this argument was not easily answered—not, at least, to the satisfaction of the non-Christian. Surely, however, to-day in the 'fifties one of the strongest arguments for the truth of Christianity lies in a study of this Secular Reaction of the past seventy-five years, from which we are now emerging. The present state of England is one of the clearest proofs of the truth of Christianity which we possess.

Back in the eighteen-seventies, Christianity was apparently secure. The Evangelical Movement was strong and held the initiative. The Oxford Movement was advancing, but in its basis it still owed much to evangelicalism, and most of its leaders had evangelical backgrounds. Churchgoing was normal, missionary enterprise was drawing men and women on an extending scale. The conventions of morality were clearly Christian, and to offend them entailed social ostracism. In public life, many of the leading men were active and thoroughgoing Christians—Gladstone and Selborne, Granville and the Duke of Argyll among Liberals, Cairns, Salisbury and Adderley among Conservatives, to name only a few. At the other end of the scale, Christianity held the loyalties of most of the industrial population, especially in the north. Sunday was a national institution; most homes held family prayers and said grace at meals as a matter of course.

Even forty years ago, in the years immediately before the First World War, the structure of national Christianity seemed equally secure and, although standards were lower, the churches normally were full.

What, therefore, happened? The agnostic would claim that the Secular Reaction was inevitable: "Christianity is an unscientific religion and therefore was bound to lose hold." It is not necessary to be content with this answer.

The two most obvious lines on which Christianity was attacked do not need detailed repetition. Science, in the years following the controversy at the British Association of 1860, was taking an increasingly agnostic tone, while Higher Criticism, at its most destructive

stage, was undermining faith in the authority of Scripture. From this sprang the militant atheism of Bradlaugh and his disciples, the "Religion of Humanity" propagated by Comte and Frederic Harrison, the various pseudo-Christianities of men such as Matthew Arnold, and the Hedonism associated with Walter Pater (who was, in his own morals most virtuous) and Oscar Wilde (who was not).

All this, however, was limited to small though noisy sections of the highly educated upper middle class. That it was a small section is evident from the number of scientists who were not Darwinians, nor agnostics. At Cambridge alone the leaders of science in the later nineteenth century were all prominent Christians—Sedgwick, Stokes, Cayley, Adams, MacAlister and many others. The English masses, moreover, were largely untouched by this agnosticism.

The structure seemed secure Yet before many decades, Christianity appeared, to a new generation, to have been doomed inevitably In the seventies it often required a measure of courage to be an open agnostic. Among younger men in the Edwardian period, despite lip-service, it required a measure of courage to be a convinced Christian. The attack from science and Higher Criticism is not sufficient explanation for this change. The answer must be sought at a deeper level.

Most of the answer lies in the Victorian home. Family prayers, grace, Sunday observance were the order of the day. But too easily these became the impositions of Law instead of the natural reaction of Liberty. What the parents had adopted as the result of settled conviction they imposed upon their children. Often these things had been adopted merely from convention. Thus abuse was frequent: "Needless to say we too had family prayers every morning", writes Percy Colson, "This rite took place after breakfast was brought in and we thought with anguish of kidney and bacon getting cold while my father prayed fast and furiously, keeping one eye open for any signs of inattention on our part. He was always in a vile temper before breakfast, the result, I suppose, of the cold bath he took, whatever the weather. . . ." As for grace before meat, writes Laurence Housman, "it did not inculcate the thankful spirit. What we were about to receive were very often the shortcomings of the cook, and we were *not* thankful. Complaint was immediate and loud".

It could be the same with Sunday. Thus the young Alexander Irvine in his Scottish childhood, was caught by his father whistling a Moody and Sankey hymn tune on the Sabbath: "Shut up yer mook!" "It's a hymn tune," protested the boy. "I don't care a d——. It's the Lord's Day and if I hear yor whistlin' in it I'll whale the life out o' ye."

Many children suffered also from an especially dangerous product of debased Christianity—the threat of hell-fire as punishment for wrong doing, which was often as not mere disobedience to the dictates of nurse or parent. They thus grew to believe that heaven and hell depended on works, not on grace or its rejection, and inevitably they came to look on God as an Angry Old Man.

In addition, the Christianity of Victorian homes, whether heartfelt or conventional, was superimposed on current faults. The prudery associated with 'Victorian' was present long previously and was not

a creation of eighteenth or nineteenth century evangelicals. " The officiating minister," wrote an eminent judge in 1858, describing his son's wedding service, " was a puseyite and a great stickler for the Rubrick. So we had the whole of that prolix, strange and not over decent ceremonial, to the last syllable, and a young lady of nineteen was publickly told in the presence of several much younger ladies, that she was married to prevent her from doing worse, and in order that she might be got with child ". Similarly, mistaken ideas on the upbringing of children were mixed in the minds of victims with the religion of those who imposed them, and excessive use of rod and cane was normal long before the evangelical revival. In Victorian times most schoolmasters were clergymen, and children who were unhappy at school often as they grew up turned in loathing from everything which reminded them of school, religion included.

All sorts of abuses and debasements were linked in the minds of the younger generation with Christianity; yet Christianity was not responsible. The tension between Law and Liberty, the stiffness of convention and the sensitiveness of parents to the praise or criticism of their neighbours, the legacy of the past, and the reluctance of parents to let their children make mistakes and to find their own level, each contributed towards a tendency to reaction rather than imitation. Hence in many evangelical families the second generation did not follow the first. Sir (Stevenson) Arthur Blackwood was a great evangelist; his son, Algernon, the writer, was not even a convinced Christian. C. F. G. Masterman, the liberal statesman, who came from an evangelical home, for years professed agnosticism, though eventually returning to Christianity. Sir Robert Morant, the great educationalist, was another, who did not return. On the other hand, the family of Hudson Taylor, the Studds, the Buxtons, and innumerable other families, can show a succession of devoted Christians in generation after generation.

The key surely was personal conversion. Where the younger generation experienced a true, deep conversion, all was well. Where they did not, reaction from the atmosphere of home blended with the current intellectual atmosphere to produce a gradual alienation from Christianity.

This trend can be worked out in the lives of many post-Victorian figures. Somerset Maugham, both in his autobiography and in the novel *Of Human Bondage* describes his own reaction from the religiousness of his high church uncle and guardian, and his subsequent scientific rationalism. Beatrice Webb in *My Apprenticeship* shows how near she came to conversion under the influence of the noted evangelical, Philip Eliot, later Dean of Windsor; and how beneath the outward agnosticism of her later life ran the pathetic search for a personal God. " Like so many poor souls," she wrote in the 'twenties, " I have the consciousness of being a spiritual outcast. I have failed to solve the problems of life ".

Many, especially from evangelical homes, took a different course and entered the Roman Church, finding there the authority over their lives which they believed the Bible no longer could give and for which they yearned. Others, perhaps the most, became liberal humanists,

accepting the ethics of a Christianity, the creeds of which they rejected. " He told me all his views about Christianity," wrote Sir Edward Grey to his wife after talking with her father in 1888, " and they are exactly the same as yours and mine ; i.e., no doctrine, but taking Christ's teaching as the best platform of morality that has been laid down ". And though Grey returned to somewhat more definite Christian beliefs in later life, his words are typical of his generation, and reveal much of its strength and grave weakness.

By the Edwardian period, the generation which had reacted from evangelicalism was at the height of its influence. The decline of Christianity was scarcely realized, but it was mirrored in a contrast of the Liberal Cabinets of 1906 with that of Gladstone thirty years before. Asquith, Haldane, Morley, to name only three, had all passed to a more or less agnostic liberal humanism ; Lloyd George had shed the militant evangelism which had brought him his first fame as a " boy preacher ". In the Labour Party, although the Christianity of many of its leaders was still active, the Fabians were already gaining the initiative. In the country as a whole the secular reaction, which was passing through the educated classes to the masses, was given fresh impetus by the rise of the scientific novelists. H. G. Wells and his imitators had caught the ear of the vast new reading public created by the Education Act of 1870, and H. G. Wells was convinced that " God was a lie ". Wells was creating a splendid new universe in which God seemed unnecessary, and the brilliance of his imagination and the fascination of his novels gave his views the widest hearing. What Herbert Spencer had done for the educated, Wells did for the masses.

Against this, contemporary Christianity had little to offer. In the Churches, Anglo-Catholicism and Modernism held the initiative. The older Evangelicals were frankly on the defensive, many of the younger were drifting to liberalism. The Churches were torn with controversies. Although there were areas where Christianity was virile, even as thirty years previously there were patches of paganism, the structure of English religion was wearing thin. It was little more than a facade —strong on the surface, but rotten within. It needed merely a jolt to bring the structure down.

The jolt came with the War of 1914. Memoirs and memories of the period testify to the grievous loss of faith which the Great War caused. In any war there will be front-line conversions, and a true, deep faith will survive the worst that war can do, but life in the trenches more often than not left a man stripped of the conventionalities and half-faiths which he had accepted as religion, and hardened against further impressions. No example exists more pathetic or more bitter than Robert Graves' *Good-bye to All That.*

With the coming of peace the extent of the Secular Reaction was clearly revealed. The War had made a break with the past. Morals were loosened ; family life had been broken. Liberal Humanism, with its early promise that the War had ended Wars, had bred a ready optimism. Pseudo-religions—Christian Science, Spiritualism—had thrived on the perplexities and sufferings of the bereaved. " Orthodox" Christianity gave ready acquiescence to the easy belief that death

in battle gave a right to heaven : " These laid down their lives for king and country ", runs the memorial in the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy, " and now are beholding the King in His beauty and are satisfied ".

To the young of those days, who had been brought up to the conventionalities of Edwardian life and religion and had matured in the crucible of war, the old order had gone for ever. Christianity was not merely exploded ; it had become the enemy, to be attacked with bitterness and derision. The " wild " 'twenties and the early 'thirties formed an age of dogma, but the dogma was that of Scientific Humanism. Science and Progress were the criteria by which beliefs and actions were judged. In religion, liberalism enjoyed its heydey. Of conservative evangelicals, some were uncertain of their position, others fought an apparently losing battle (by human standards) against the prevalent antipathies of the period.

The most important consequence of the post-war attitude to Christianity was felt in the home. The men and women of the War generation had been given a grounding in the Christian faith, and normally they had been sent to Sunday School and to church, whatever the personal loyalties of their parents. In the Twenties they were bringing up their own families. But they were no longer bound by pre-war conventions, and more often than not gave their own children no such grounding in the faith. Not only were family prayers, grace and Sunday observance discarded, but also Sunday School and Church. By the outbreak of the Second War the older children of these paganized homes were themselves beginning to marry and have children. At the present day, with these children now in their 'teens, the nation is beginning to reap the bitter fruits of the Secular Reaction.

The Second World War, however, had no such effect as the First. ' Religion ' was better received by 1945 than it had been in '39. The reaction from Darwinism is in full swing, though as yet it has not permeated to the masses. The Bible can no longer be dismissed as a hotch-potch of mythology, sentimentality and ethics, and the young can no longer be fobbed off with rationalist arguments which doped their fathers. Religious controversy has slackened. In the nation as a whole, antipathies have been replaced partly by indifference, partly by a somewhat listless desire to discover the truth.

In the perplexities of the post-war world the cry is for Security, Certainty and Direction. Science cannot give it, for Science is no longer held infallible. Liberalism has been proved false, Humanism unreliable. Everything seems in flux. But the true evangelical faith stands as a rock. The Bible proves its ancient power ; Jesus Christ shows Himself the same to-day as ever. Justification by Faith shows itself the doctrine which the years have not destroyed. The Gospel, fearlessly proclaimed, has power and authority, while other powers and authorities have waned.

Twenty years ago this was difficult to see. Christians believed in the power of the Gospel ; those outside found it hard to believe, and to come within the fold. The young had no use for Christianity. But to-day it is the young who are leading their elders back to Christ.

The present position, therefore, its cause, its dangers and its hopes,

provide a strong argument for the truth of Christianity. A thoughtful man, not yet a Christian, may be brought to consider the Secular Reaction and its consequences, and can form his own judgment. He will see how the Post-Victorians, reacting from the faith of their fathers, struck for a better world, but one in which Christian doctrine should have no place. He will see the grievous results of this false hope. He must consider the position to-day—ethical, national, personal. He should read such books as Sir Leo Page's *The Young Lag* (Faber 1950) : " He has no religion," so Page sums up the outlook of young offenders (p. 272), " No faith, no inspiration. As a materialist he judges rewards and punishments by wholly materialist standards and conceptions. That he would find any satisfaction or contentment in living honestly for the mere reason that it is right to be honest and wrong to be dishonest he regards as absurd. . . ."

By strict study of modern history the thoughtful man should see the grievous result of the Secular Reaction. He will see also that Religion is not enough ; what so often in the world passes for Christianity is not enough. The evidence leads to one conclusion : that nothing is true but the Truth—the gospel of the Grace of God, the knowledge of Christ Who said, " I am the Way, the Truth and the Life ".

The Bible and the Pulpit

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MUCH modern preaching is weak and ineffective, disappointing and unconvincing, because of a lack in the preacher of adequate conviction concerning the place of the Bible in the pulpit. Those of us who are called to this task of preaching greatly need a new awakening to, and a consequent compelling awareness of, the character of our stewardship. For, " *it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful* " (1 Corinthians iv. 2).

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The Christian preacher has something unique to offer to men—the proclamation that God has acted in human history, both to reveal Himself and to redeem mankind. So our Gospel for men ought not to be found in human philosophy and man-made ideas, and still less in our personal preferences and prejudices, but in the declaration of God's self-revealing and saving acts.

These acts of God, because they are acts in history, possess the character of particularity and once-for-all-ness. God is not repeating them in each fresh generation. If, therefore, they are to fulfil their universal and age-long purpose of speaking to all men, and bringing to them light and hope, worthy record, appropriate interpretation and effective announcement of them are indispensable. Nor has God left such necessary complementary ministries to chance. Prophets and