

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 Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CRISIS IN AMERICA AND THE SEARCH FOR GOD

DURING difficult times in Europe, Karl Barth spoke of crisis in the modern world, and of man seeking God as a drowning man catching at a straw. The conditions of the world seemed to him so terrible that he came to conceive God as the Wholly Other. Some years ago Emil Brunner warned that owing to prosperity in the United States, the people of this country were unable for a time to understand the Theology of Crisis and the concept of the Wholly Other. For us even then the passing of prosperous days was drawing near.

It is true that in the face of anti-Christian expressions and anti-Christian actions in our present world, including our own land, there is a returning desire for Christianity that is often that of men who are grasping after God from the midst of a plight for which there is no evident possibility of relief except through the Gospel in its totality. The plight is such that many men feel that they are seeking God at a late hour after a period of forgetfulness owing to freedom from anguish and agony.

My purpose is to indicate some of the distinct trends of recent times that have led to this late search; and to maintain that, despite past neglect and untoward circumstances of the present, the time is not too late for seeking after God, in view of the strange declaration of the Gospel, borne out also in experience, that those who seek God if haply they might find Him do not find Him in the end owing to a perfect life in the past.

I

THE RISE OF NATURALISM

A distinctive movement of the modern world since about 1860 has been the rise of naturalism, with positivism and materialism as its two important phases.

In general, the naturalistic movement belonging especially to the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part

of the twentieth emphasized the natural as opposed to the supernatural in case of a consideration of man. However, materialism was a more crass form of naturalism than was positivism, in view of the fact that positivism at least retained an interest in man, whereas materialism fostered a cynical attitude toward man himself.

Positivism was more common to France, and materialism to Germany. The positivism of France rooted far back in the history of that country. The naturalism of the eighteenth century, associated with the Revolution, was in part a result of a concern for the desperate plight of the French people and for social reform which ecclesiastical organizations opposed. Interest in social reform toward the improvement of human conditions led to a swinging of the pendulum not only away from the ecclesiastical groups which opposed reform; but also away from the supernaturalism emphasized by these groups, and toward the naturalism associated with the Revolution.

The strife with groups opposing all forms of change that might lead to the betterment of the people was long and difficult, and led ultimately to what have been called the "excesses of the Revolution". Thus, the processes by which naturalism became grounded in France become obvious, especially if we recall the influences of developing science.

The outgrowth by 1860 was the form of naturalism called positivism. Positivism differed from materialism in emphasizing the method of science rather than its content with respect to the consideration of man. It assumed that man and society are natural products, and can be known only by the scientific method. Further, it emphasized social reform in view of a fundamental interest in man and society. Consequently, the naturalism of France was tempered at least by humanitarian interests.

Saint-Simon (1760-1825) emphasized the idea of a naturalistic philosophy of history, suggested a classification of the sciences which placed the study of man as the highest, and urged social reform in a fashion suggestive of socialistic thought.

Saint-Simon influenced Auguste Comte, though Comte failed to recognize the fact owing to a personal disagreement. Comte also proposed a study of man as the greatest of the scientific studies in culmination of the sciences which he classified after the manner of Saint-Simon. It is of interest to note

that Comte never rid himself of a religious interest, and consequently proposed what he called a Religion of Society.

As is to be expected, there were at the same time spiritualistic thinkers in France, as, for example, Cousin, of wide reputation.

In Germany naturalism tended to assume the dominant form of materialism. Whereas positivism proposed to adopt the method of science rather than its content in the study of man, materialism undertook to interpret man wholly in terms of the content of the physical sciences. The crass form of materialism in Germany is illustrated by the famous dictum of Feuerbach, "*Man ist was er isst*" ("Man is what he eats"), and the dictum of Moleschott, "*Ohne Phosphor, kein Gedanke*" ("No phosphorus, no thought").

Associated with materialism there developed a form of "liberalism" in theology reflected by such men as David Strauss who reduced the orthodox dogmas to myths and proposed a naturalistic pantheism. It was with theological liberalism that Karl Barth became so extremely disillusioned, especially with the optimistic liberalism of a later time which expected a new and better world for which hope seemed blasted upon the outbreak of the World War.

II

SOCIAL DARWINISM

Social Darwinism stemmed more from biology than from the physics upon which German materialism was inclined to rest its case. It is the application of the Darwinian teachings to ethics and society, with emphasis upon struggle and the survival of the fittest as indicating the norm of life, and upon the view that the struggle would lead to a glorious era of the world through an evolutionary process.

Herbert Spencer is notable in having expected a new and better world through struggle and unbridled competition. He went so far as to express the view that industrial society would do away with all wars.

It is important to note that Social Darwinism also appropriated the theories of Adam Smith, the economist, and was therefore appropriate to the business practices of the advancing industrial revolution whose characteristic expression became, "Business is business".

A total view came to assume that business is business, that whatever works is right, that might is right, and that successful individuals are to be admired, however they may have achieved success.

Under Nietzsche the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest was carried to a logical extreme in the theory that truth is merely a function to an end, and that hardness and unscrupulous cruelty must take the place of sympathy. "Be hard," he said. "Again I say, be hard." He proposed that under the theory of the survival of the fittest "the Superman is the meaning of the world."

Nietzsche's view was fairly appropriate to German militarism and the theory that might is right.

In other countries Social Darwinism was appropriate to the apotheosis of business with reference only to the success of business, and without reference to the moral principles of business.

All in all, there was a trend in the modern world toward opportunism that went far beyond diplomacy in sanctioning the view that truth is only a function to an end, that unscrupulous procedure is to be adopted if it will work (that is, if one "can get by with it"), and that the sympathy taught by Christianity is an impediment. Theologically, men were inclined to forget God, or else to doubt or deny His existence. Naturalism, with a trend toward materialism, had a powerful hold in the Western World with respect to considerations of man.

III

ECONOMIC MATERIALISM

The economic materialism of Karl Marx added further emphasis to the naturalistic trend, together with a great deal of confusion.

Karl Marx is most commonly associated with Communism, though in reality the idea of economic determinism which he taught has had a wide hold among many who are rabidly opposed to Communism and have a horror of Karl Marx. The view that economic determinants are the primary determinants among men, and that economic values are the primary values, is not at all uncommon; and, in view of certain expressions of Jesus, was evidently a prominent view long ago.

It has become obvious that historically economic materialism, as wide-spread as it is, has been associated with metaphysical materialism which denies the spirituality of man and the existence of God. Clearly, materialism pushed beyond the position of the Deists of the French Revolution and the American Revolution who had not reached the point of denying dogmatically either the spirituality of man or the existence of God, and even beyond the position of the positivistic phase of naturalism.

IV

A VIEW FOR GOOD TIMES

When economic conditions were good, men were in a position to flaunt opportunism and feel expansive in the face of opportunity. In all fields an extreme relativism was applied, with a questioning of all forms of reality as these belong to human behaviour.

With this trend there was a luxury of cynicism probably never so supreme as during the prosperous days of the 'twenties in this country.

It was hardly remembered that man needs God, or that man is fundamentally under the control of laws, even natural laws for which a naturalistic age seemingly would have had more respect.

There was a generalized belief in progress, without regard for distinctly natural laws, economic laws, and moral laws.

It is true, of course, that there were wiser men who tried to call attention to disastrous possibilities awaiting the nations. A prophet is unheeded, of course, until the crisis has already come. It seemed undesirable to conceive that man cannot ultimately neglect or defy the laws of God. Despite the necessities of the scientific method and the exaltation of science, doubt has been expressed throughout the Western World, in so far as man is concerned, that truth is grounded in reality.

V

THE HARDER DAYS

The culmination of a most materialistic age has been most psychic in its manifestations. In Germany, for example, the writers, and more lately the political leaders, turn from the

viewpoint of scientific calculation to a dependence upon empathy (*Einfrülung*) and understanding, or insight (*Verstehen*); that is to say, what we might call intuition.

Despite the peculiar manifestations, however, there are those who by shock have come to have a higher regard for truth, and who seek with hope the mercy of God and even the mercy of those who know God and keep His commandments.

Among desperate men there are those who see the contending forces of earth intent upon the destruction of each other. "What", they ask, "may stand above? And what may stand between?" Then there comes to mind a thought of God and of the Christ.

The disillusionment that came over the world when science and industry failed to bring about a utopian society is such that one is hardly able to do more than mention it without daring to recount it in detail. Almost all men have been affected by the disillusionment, even though they might deny it or avoid thinking of it as much as possible.

In a sense, man struck his head against solid reality. Now, after disrupting change, he wishes to know and achieve what is right and good, but with a feeling that his predicament is such that he is nearly too late. The nations themselves are acting in the fashion of desperation.

Along with the present dependence upon intuition which leads even to acts of cruelty hardly with precedent in the history of the Western World, and along with the various political and religious isms that have sprung up rapidly even in our own nation, there is a yearning for an intervention of God in the affairs of men toward ransom and redemption. This is a fact that could not easily be proved by statistics; it is one known by observation and experience. A tyrannical dictator calls upon Providence in a time of desperation, however unworthy his appeal may be, and even if the time may have passed when he may call upon God and be heard and seek Him when He may be found.

So it is with man, however inconsiderate he may be in neglecting to call upon God until a time of crisis.

The materialistic emphasis is now much less prominent; the anti-religious movement has waned peculiarly. I know this to be a fact by experience in academic centres, and by the trend of journalistic articles.

VI

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I proceed with an expression of a faith, rather than with the method of recounting what seems to be correct observation.

It is now the hour for the Gospel to be heralded in its totality and without negativism. They who are well need no physician; and men are now ill and seeking a physician in whatever strange places.

The Gospel, which offers salvation to individual men, and the fellowship of the Kingdom of God of which Jesus said to His disciples, "The Kingdom of God is within you", will yet reap the fruitage of its promise. The need of this Gospel is one to which I urgently express profound testimony, even with an appropriate degree of appeal.

God stands above men who strive with each other. It is through Christ that He may stand between.

In peculiar ways men are seeking God. I believe there is yet time for men to call upon Him while He may hear, and seek Him while He may be found. The Gospel offers undeserved hope. One supposes that for that reason it was called the Gospel. The trends of an age may lead toward a renewal of faith that has a zeal also accompanied by knowledge. It may be that the world has suffered with travail in recent times, and suffered so until now when the Word will be announced in the face of a warring world,—announced even by men to whom the injury of strife in the present world has contributed a confirmation of certainty.

HAYER C. CURRIE.

129 W. Eighth Street,
Hattiesburg, Mississippi.