

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

THE IDEA OF A CHURCH

1. THE WORLD DAWN

As yet those who may be counted as belonging definitely to the new religion are few and scattered and unconfessed, their realisations are still uncertain and incomplete. But that is no augury for the continuance of this state of affairs even for the next few decades. There are many signs that the revival is coming very swiftly, it may be coming as swiftly as the morning comes after a tropical night. It may seem at present as though nothing very much were happening, except for the fact that the old familiar constellations of theology have become a little pallid and lost something of their multitude of points. But nothing fades of itself. The deep stillness of the late night is broken by a stirring, and the morning star of creedless faith, the last and brightest of the stars, the star that owes its light to the coming sun is in the sky.

There is a stirring and a movement. There is a stir, like the stir before a breeze. Men are beginning to speak of religion without the bluster of the Christian formulae; they have begun to speak of God

without any reference to Omnipresence, Omniscience, Omnipotence. The Deists and Theists of an older generation, be it noted, never did that. Their "Supreme Being" repudiated nothing. He was merely the whittled stump of the Trinity. It is in the last few decades that the western mind has slipped loose from this absolutist conception of God that has dominated the intelligence of Christendom at least, for many centuries. Almost unconsciously the new thought is taking a course that will lead it far away from the moorings of Omnipotence. It is like a ship that has slipped its anchors and drifts, still sleeping, under the pale and vanishing stars, out to the open sea. . . .

2. CONVERGENT RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

In quite a little while the whole world may be alive with this renascent faith.

For emancipation from the Trinitarian formularies and from a belief in an infinite God means not merely a great revivification of minds trained under the decadence of orthodox Christianity, minds which have hitherto been hopelessly embarrassed by the choice between pseudo-Christian religion or denial, but also it opens the way towards the completest understanding and sympathy and participation with the kindred movements for release and for an intensification of the religious life, that are

going on outside the sphere of the Christian tradition and influence altogether. Allusion has already been made to the sympathetic devotional poetry of Rabindranath Tagore; he stands for a movement in Brahminism parallel with and assimilable to the worship of the true God of mankind.

It is too often supposed that the religious tendency of the East is entirely towards other-worldness, to a treatment of this life as an evil entanglement and of death as a release and a blessing. It is too easily assumed that Eastern teaching is wholly concerned with renunciation, not merely of self but of being, with the escape from all effort of any sort into an exalted vacuity. This is indeed neither the spirit of China nor of Islam nor of the every-day life of any people in the world. It is not the spirit of the Sikh nor of these newer developments of Hindu thought. It has never been the spirit of Japan. To-day less than ever does Asia seem disposed to give up life and the effort of life. Just as readily as Europeans, do the Asiatics reach out their arms to that fuller life we can live, that greater intensity of existence, to which we can attain by escaping from ourselves. All mankind is seeking God. There is not a nation nor a city in the globe where men are not being urged at this moment by the spirit of God in them towards the discovery of God. This is not an age of despair but an age of hope in Asia as in all the world besides.

Islam is undergoing a process of revision closely parallel to that which ransacks Christianity. Tradition and mediaeval doctrines are being thrust aside in a similar way. There is much probing into the spirit and

intention of the Founder. The time is almost ripe for a heart-searching Dialogue of the Dead, "How we settled our religions for ever and ever," between, let us say, Eusebius of Caesarea and one of Nizam-al-Mulk's tame theologians. They would be drawn together by the same tribulations; they would be in the closest sympathy against the temerity of the moderns; they would have a common courtliness. The Quran is but little read by Europeans; it is ignorantly supposed to contain many things that it does not contain; there is much confusion in people's minds between its text and the ancient Semitic traditions and usages retained by its followers; in places it may seem formless and barbaric; but what it has chiefly to tell of is the leadership of one individualised militant God who claims the rule of the whole world, who favours neither rank nor race, who would lead men to righteousness. It is much more free from sacramentalism, from vestiges of the ancient blood sacrifice, and its associated sacerdotalism, than Christianity. The religion that will presently sway mankind can be reached more easily from that starting-point than from the confused mysteries of Trinitarian theology. Islam was never saddled with a creed. With the very name "Islam" (submission to God) there is no quarrel for those who hold the new faith. . . .

All the world over there is this stirring in the dry bones of the old beliefs. There is scarcely a religion that has not its Bahaism, its Modernists, its Brahma Somaj, its "religion without theology," its attempts to escape from old forms and hampering associations to that living and world-wide spiritual reality upon which the human mind almost

instinctively insists. . . .

It is the same God we all seek; he becomes more and more plainly the same God.

So that all this religious stir, which seems so multifold and incidental and disconnected and confused and entirely ineffective to-day, may be and most probably will be, in quite a few years a great flood of religious unanimity pouring over and changing all human affairs, sweeping away the old priesthoods and tabernacles and symbols and shrines, the last crumb of the Orphic victim and the last rag of the Serapeum, and turning all men about into one direction, as the ships and houseboats swing round together in some great river with the uprush of the tide. . . .

3. CAN THERE BE A TRUE CHURCH?

Among those who are beginning to realise the differences and identities of the revived religion that has returned to them, certain questions of organisation and assembly are being discussed. Every new religious development is haunted by the precedents of the religion it replaces, and it was only to be expected that among those who have recovered their faith there should be a search for apostles and disciples, an attempt to

determine sources and to form original congregations, especially among people with European traditions.

These dispositions mark a relapse from understanding. They are imitative. This time there has been no revelation here or there; there is no claim to a revelation but simply that God has become visible. Men have thought and sought until insensibly the fog of obsolete theology has cleared away. There seems no need therefore for special teachers or a special propaganda, or any ritual or observances that will seem to insist upon differences. The Christian precedent of a church is particularly misleading. The church with its sacraments and its sacerdotalism is the disease of Christianity. Save for a few doubtful interpolations there is no evidence that Christ tolerated either blood sacrifices or the mysteries of priesthood. All these antique grossnesses were superadded after his martyrdom. He preached not a cult but a gospel; he sent out not medicine men but apostles.

No doubt all who believe owe an apostolic service to God. They become naturally apostolic. As men perceive and realise God, each will be disposed in his own fashion to call his neighbour's attention to what he sees. The necessary elements of religion could be written on a post card; this book, small as it is, bulks large not by what it tells positively but because it deals with misconceptions. We may (little doubt have I that we do) need special propagandas and organisations to discuss errors and keep back the jungle of false ideas, to maintain free speech and restrain the enterprise of the persecutor, but we do not want

a church to keep our faith for us. We want our faith spread, but for that there is no need for orthodoxies and controlling organisations of statement. It is for each man to follow his own impulse, and to speak to his like in his own fashion.

Whatever religious congregations men may form henceforth in the name of the true God must be for their own sakes and not to take charge of religion.

The history of Christianity, with its encrustation and suffocation in dogmas and usages, its dire persecutions of the faithful by the unfaithful, its desiccation and its unlovely decay, its invasion by robes and rites and all the tricks and vices of the Pharisees whom Christ detested and denounced, is full of warning against the dangers of a church. Organisation is an excellent thing for the material needs of men, for the draining of towns, the marshalling of traffic, the collecting of eggs, and the carrying of letters, the distribution of bread, the notification of measles, for hygiene and economics and suchlike affairs. The better we organise such things, the freer and better equipped we leave men's minds for nobler purposes, for those adventures and experiments towards God's purpose which are the reality of life. But all organisations must be watched, for whatever is organised can be "captured" and misused. Repentance, moreover, is the beginning and essential of the religious life, and organisations (acting through their secretaries and officials) never repent. God deals only with the individual for the individual's surrender. He takes no

cognisance of committees.

Those who are most alive to the realities of living religion are most mistrustful of this congregating tendency. To gather together is to purchase a benefit at the price of a greater loss, to strengthen one's sense of brotherhood by excluding the majority of mankind. Before you know where you are you will have exchanged the spirit of God for ESPRIT DE CORPS. You will have reinvented the SYMBOL; you will have begun to keep anniversaries and establish sacramental ceremonies. The disposition to form cliques and exclude and conspire against unlike people is all too strong in humanity, to permit of its formal encouragement. Even such organisation as is implied by a creed is to be avoided, for all living faith coagulates as you phrase it. In this book I have not given so much as a definite name to the faith of the true God. Organisation for worship and collective exaltation also, it may be urged, is of little manifest good. You cannot appoint beforehand a time and place for God to irradiate your soul.

All these are very valid objections to the church-forming disposition.

4. ORGANISATIONS UNDER GOD

Yet still this leaves many dissatisfied. They want to shout out about

God. They want to share this great thing with all mankind.

Why should they not shout and share?

Let them express all that they desire to express in their own fashion by themselves or grouped with their friends as they will. Let them shout chorally if they are so disposed. Let them work in a gang if so they can work the better. But let them guard themselves against the idea that they can have God particularly or exclusively with them in any such undertaking. Or that so they can express God rather than themselves.

That I think states the attitude of the modern spirit towards the idea of a church. Mankind passes for ever out of the idolatry of altars, away from the obscene rites of circumcision and symbolical cannibalism, beyond the sway of the ceremonial priest. But if the modern spirit holds that religion cannot be organised or any intermediary thrust between God and man, that does not preclude infinite possibilities of organisation and collective action UNDER God and within the compass of religion. There is no reason why religious men should not band themselves the better to attain specific ends. To borrow a term from British politics, there is no objection to AD HOC organisations. The objection lies not against subsidiary organisations for service but against organisations that may claim to be comprehensive.

For example there is no reason why one should not--and in many cases there are good reasons why one should--organise or join associations

for the criticism of religious ideas, an employment that may pass very readily into propaganda.

Many people feel the need of prayer to resist the evil in themselves and to keep them in mind of divine emotion. And many want not merely prayer but formal prayer and the support of others, praying in unison. The writer does not understand this desire or need for collective prayer very well, but there are people who appear to do so and there is no reason why they should not assemble for that purpose. And there is no doubt that divine poetry, divine maxims, religious thought finely expressed, may be heard, rehearsed, collected, published, and distributed by associations. The desire for expression implies a sort of assembly, a hearer at least as well as a speaker. And expression has many forms. People with a strong artistic impulse will necessarily want to express themselves by art when religion touches them, and many arts, architecture and the drama for example, are collective undertakings. I do not see why there should not be, under God, associations for building cathedrals and suchlike great still places urgent with beauty, into which men and women may go to rest from the clamour of the day's confusions; I do not see why men should not make great shrines and pictures expressing their sense of divine things, and why they should not combine in such enterprises rather than work to fill heterogeneous and chaotic art galleries. A wave of religious revival and religious clarification, such as I foresee, will most certainly bring with it a great revival of art, religious art, music, songs, and writings of all sorts, drama, the making of shrines, praying places, temples and

retreats, the creation of pictures and sculptures. It is not necessary to have priestcraft and an organised church for such ends. Such enrichments of feeling and thought are part of the service of God.

And again, under God, there may be associations and fraternities for research in pure science; associations for the teaching and simplification of languages; associations for promoting and watching education; associations for the discussion of political problems and the determination of right policies. In all these ways men may multiply their use by union. Only when associations seek to control things of belief, to dictate formulae, restrict religious activities or the freedom of religious thought and teaching, when they tend to subdivide those who believe and to set up jealousies or exclusions, do they become antagonistic to the spirit of modern religion.

5. THE STATE IS GOD'S INSTRUMENT

Because religion cannot be organised, because God is everywhere and immediately accessible to every human being, it does not follow that religion cannot organise every other human affair. It is indeed essential to the idea that God is the Invisible King of this round world and all mankind, that we should see in every government, great and small, from the council of the world-state that is presently coming,

down to the village assembly, the instrument of God's practical control. Religion which is free, speaking freely through whom it will, subject to a perpetual unlimited criticism, will be the life and driving power of the whole organised world. So that if you prefer not to say that there will be no church, if you choose rather to declare that the world-state is God's church, you may have it so if you will. Provided that you leave conscience and speech and writing and teaching about divine things absolutely free, and that you try to set no nets about God.

The world is God's and he takes it. But he himself remains freedom, and we find our freedom in him.

THE ENVOY

So I end this compact statement of the nascent religion which I believe to be crystallising out of the intellectual, social, and spiritual confusions of this time. It is an account rendered. It is a statement and record; not a theory. There is nothing in all this that has been invented or constructed by the writer; I have been but scribe to the spirit of my generation; I have at most assembled and put together things and thoughts that I have come upon, have transferred the statements of "science" into religious terminology, rejected obsolescent definitions, and re-coordinated propositions that had drifted into

opposition. Thus, I see, ideas are developing, and thus have I written them down. It is a secondary matter that I am convinced that this trend of intelligent opinion is a discovery of truth. The reader is told of my own belief merely to avoid an affectation of impartiality and aloofness.

The theogony here set forth is ancient; one can trace it appearing and disappearing and recurring in the mutilated records of many different schools of speculation; the conception of God as finite is one that has been discussed very illuminatingly in recent years in the work of one I am happy to write of as my friend and master, that very great American, the late William James. It was an idea that became increasingly important to him towards the end of his life. And it is the most releasing idea in the system.

Only in the most general terms can I trace the other origins of these present views. I do not think modern religion owes much to what is called Deism or Theism. The rather abstract and futile Deism of the eighteenth century, of "votre Etre supreme" who bored the friends of Robespierre, was a sterile thing, it has little relation to these modern developments, it conceived of God as an infinite Being of no particular character whereas God is a finite being of a very especial character. On the other hand men and women who have set themselves, with unavoidable theological preconceptions, it is true, to speculate upon the actual teachings and quality of Christ, have produced interpretations that have interwoven insensibly with thoughts more apparently new. There is a curious modernity about very many of Christ's recorded sayings. Revived

religion has also, no doubt, been the receiver of many religious bankruptcies, of Positivism for example, which failed through its bleak abstraction and an unspiritual texture. Religion, thus restated, must, I think, presently incorporate great sections of thought that are still attached to formal Christianity. The time is at hand when many of the organised Christian churches will be forced to define their positions, either in terms that will identify them with this renaissance, or that will lead to the release of their more liberal adherents. Its probable obligations to Eastern thought are less readily estimated by a European writer.

Modern religion has no revelation and no founder; it is the privilege and possession of no coterie of disciples or exponents; it is appearing simultaneously round and about the world exactly as a crystallising substance appears here and there in a super-saturated solution. It is a process of truth, guided by the divinity in men. It needs no other guidance, and no protection. It needs nothing but freedom, free speech, and honest statement. Out of the most mixed and impure solutions a growing crystal is infallibly able to select its substance. The diamond arises bright, definite, and pure out of a dark matrix of structureless confusion.

This metaphor of crystallisation is perhaps the best symbol of the advent and growth of the new understanding. It has no church, no authorities, no teachers, no orthodoxy. It does not even thrust and struggle among the other things; simply it grows clear. There will be

no putting an end to it. It arrives inevitably, and it will continue to separate itself out from confusing ideas. It becomes, as it were the Koh-i-noor; it is a Mountain of Light, growing and increasing. It is an all-pervading lucidity, a brightness and clearness. It has no head to smite, no body you can destroy; it overleaps all barriers; it breaks out in despite of every enclosure. It will compel all things to orient themselves to it.

It comes as the dawn comes, through whatever clouds and mists may be here or whatever smoke and curtains may be there. It comes as the day comes to the ships that put to sea.

It is the Kingdom of God at hand.

THE END