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True Meaning of "the Coming Crisis"

The Interchurch leaders' confession of division among religious forces in this country prompts a further inquiry

EARL C. DAVIS

"INTERCHURCH LEADERS See a Coming Crisis" is the title of the most interesting article that has appeared in THE REGISTER in many moons. But the prophecy of a "division of the Protestant world into Liberals and Reactionaries" is not the entire case. The late George Burman Foster, in that great book "The Finality of the Christian Religion," said on the deeper meaning of this issue:—

... not the scientific interest merely, but the religious and moral most of all, have demolished the principle of absolutism of Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy, and a further development of religion is the order of the day. Demolished, did I say? The tree seems full fruited. *Zeitgeist* is a mighty support. Force, not ideals, is god, and force tends to absolutism. Absolutism in business, which is mammonism; in government, which is militarism,—this repression of individuality, this faith in force, this unfaith in ideals, is an expression in another form of the orthodoxies which build on some sort of institutional infallibility; and the former reinforce the latter. There is an attraction and fascination on the part of each for the other. Thus the outlook for absolutism seems favorable. Moreover, the positivism of science without philosophy, *i.e.*, naturalism, plays into the hands of this other positivism of external authority.

Nevertheless, I do not believe in the triumph of any of those absolutisms. The victory is not with the strong, not with force, but with ideals.

Here is the statement of the issue of which the coming crisis in Protestantism is a manifestation. The issue runs through every institution and value of modern life. No person, institution, or doctrine can escape the remorseless pressure. On the one hand there is the principle of orthodoxy, of some kind of external authority and institutional infallibility that forces its will on the minority, on the individual, and compels conformity. All forces in society (industrial, political, social, educational, or religious) that believe in this principle of absolutism have a common interest. The man who believes in forcing a religious conformity joins hands with the man who believes in forcing a political or industrial conformity. Each has an attraction and a fascination for the other.

They have had their fling in the past. The results are manifest. Their toll in our modern world has been tragically exacting. But now they have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Their kingdom is divided. A new order is rising on the ruins. They plunged us into war. They destroyed the chances of peace. They divided nation against nation, class against class. Now they threaten to plunge us into still greater travail. But they have been discredited, even if they are still in the field. Professor Foster's assertion is true, that "victory is not with force."

But what may be said for "ideals"? Beneath the surface of things a realignment is taking place of men on this fundamental issue. It is operating in religion, in politics, in industry, in philosophy, in science, in social standards. Over against the faith in external authority and infallibility, great or small, backed by force and coercion, there is developing with astonishing rapidity a faith in a realistic truth, determined and applied by the democratic method of freedom and fellowship. In industry, there is developing a faith in co-operation, democratic management, democratic ownership. Over against the faith in armies and navies,

constabularies, and Cossacks as the source of power in domestic and international politics, there is developing a faith in the principles of justice, candor, and human values. This faith is growing, and one day will arrive. Over against creed, dogma, and meaningless ritual in religion, there is developing a faith in the integrity of man, of the universe, the integrity of God.

It has been said that the stream of modern thought has been running in two channels,—the right channel of idealism, and the left channel of materialism. The former has been interested primarily in the philosophical and spiritual approach to the problems of life. The latter has been interested in the scientific and materialistic approach. These two channels are coming together. The idealist is learning the claims of the realist, and the realist is learning the claims of the idealist. Both are learning to compare, relate, and exchange the results of research, observation, and experience. The idealist is coming to see that the ideal is not a spiritual value to be imposed upon reality; the ideal is to be discovered and developed in reality. The materialist is coming to see that the ideal that grows out of reality is as valid, has as good standing in this universe, as the chemical elements. So the two channels of modern thought are merging into one stream. The ideal that develops in reality is the valid ideal. Against such, force cannot and never will prevail.

"Religion without supernaturalism, and science without naturalism" is the thesis of Professor Foster's book. It is the growing idea in modern development.

How rapidly the reunited current of modern life is entering into the spirit, the thought, and the action of the times is open to observation. It is working irresistibly in the field of industry; and in politics, while it has not registered, it is accumulating wisdom and energy. It is working in the field of education, in the field of religion, casting off dead values, reasserting the claims of moral leadership, substituting reality for pretensions, and re-establishing the full man in the modern world.

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Whether one works from the point of view of industry, or politics, or religion, one finds that one has a natural attraction and fascination for all others working for the new order that is developing out of the ruins of the past. They mix, interchange values, understand one another. They belong together. This fellowship runs through all classes, all orders of society. It undercuts all creeds and ecclesiastical parties. It leaps the boundaries of narrow nationalism. It smiles at the bigotry of the sectarian, at the fears and snobbishness of the cults of privilege, the cheap reactionism that masquerades under the cover of patriotism.

The Unitarian movement, and fellowship in so far as it has held to the task handed down by the great leaders, is flesh and blood, body and soul, of this great new world. Our great ones have made great contributions to this development, and we have a very definite contribution to make to it. We have learned that high moral and spiritual standards may be maintained in freedom and fellowship, that men and women may achieve noble character without coercion, that free interchange of ideas conserves and promotes truth, that a religious fellowship may survive and increase without dogma or bishop, that behind us there is a great human tradition that is for the enrichment and nourishment of the intellectual and moral values of life.