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Volume One Number Two

November 1952

A Christian Critique of Contemporary Democracy

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In an article that I wrote in the last number of this *Journal* I attempted to answer the question whether the ideals of democracy could be derived from Hinduism. I maintained that they could not be, at least not from monistic Hinduism. The subject of democracy is not merely of academic interest. India has voted for democracy and many are convinced that the success or failure of the democratic experiment in India will influence the future course of history in many lands of Asia. India has thus a tremendous responsibility on her shoulders. To the Christian, the success or failure of democracy is not a matter of indifference. I maintained in my last article that the democratic ideals could be derived only from the Christian Faith. Now we must add that certain Christian values can be maintained only in a democratically ordered society. This is the reason for the Christian's concern regarding the fate of democracy in any land.

In this article I propose briefly to apply the Christian critique to democracy as it is found in practice in some of the countries of the West. My purpose in doing this is to warn my countrymen against certain evils that have crept into contemporary democracy in the West. These evils are due partly to false ideological foundations and partly to culture in industrialized countries being increasingly moulded by technology. The evils are avoidable to some extent at least, and a country which has just started on the democratic path may with benefit enquire into the causes and nature of these evils.

Secular Versus Christian Ideology

In the first place let us examine some of the false ideological foundations of modern democracy. Modern Europe owes a great debt of gratitude to two great movements, viz. the Renaissance and the Reformation. Both these movements contributed ideas which revolutionized the life of European peoples. Some of these ideas emanating separately from the two movements had certain close resemblances. Nevertheless there was an over-plus of meaning in those ideas contributed by the Reformation, for the Reformation was a religious movement, whereas the Renaissance was purely a secular movement. This over-plus of meaning constituted a big difference despite many resemblances. Though Christian influences played a no mean part in the development of democratic ideology in the West, the ideas growing out of the

Renaissance on the whole seemed to have had a greater influence. This is understandable. The Renaissance had an earlier start and as a secular movement it touched the interests of a far greater circle of people than a religious movement could. Furthermore, the Reformation initially had hardly touched the Anglo-Saxon world and in France the political forces were against it. But there was in course of time a serious confusion.

The resemblance in certain respects between some of the ideas of the Renaissance and some of the Reformation, tended to make people think that in adopting the ideas of the Renaissance they were adopting the ideas of the Christian Faith. The result was that the over-plus of meaning attached to the ideas supplied by the Reformation was ignored and the ideological basis for democracy in its inception was supplied by a pagan philosophy that bore a superficial resemblance to Christian philosophy. The West has had to pay a heavy price for this and it is only in recent times that the realization has come that a civilization that was thought to be Christian was not in fact wholly so.

The Ideas of the Renaissance and the Reformation

What is the character of the ideas contributed by the Renaissance and what is the difference between its ideas and those of the Reformation? Our answer will cover only a limited field. J. A. Symonds writes thus about the Renaissance: 'What the word Renaissance means is new birth to liberty—the spirit of mankind recovering consciousness and the power of self-determination, recognizing the beauty of the outer world and of the body through art, liberating reason in science and the conscience in religion, restoring culture to intelligence and establishing the principle of political freedom.' No words could perhaps more adequately describe the impulses that are at work in the awakening of the whole of the East at present than these words of Symonds about the Renaissance. And yet these impulses, noble as they are, can supply but an inadequate foundation on which to build our future. It is true that the Renaissance discovered certain truths of utmost importance. There was the re-discovery of man as an individual with the right to self-determination. There was the consequent re-discovery of the values of liberty and freedom. Man was removed from the sphere of an authority operating mechanically and impersonally. His capacity for reason was recognized and awarded the right to order his life according to its best lights. The Renaissance looked upon man, however, as an autonomous being, his existence and nature requiring no extra-mundane reference for their explanation. Man had certain 'natural rights' and among them was the right to personal liberty and freedom.

The Reformers also laid stress on the reality of man's individuality and on his right to personal freedom. This they stressed because there was no ambiguity on this point in the Bible, but they followed the Bible further and sought to understand man from the fact of his being a creature, owing his existence to God his Creator. The implication of such a belief is that 'natural rights' on which secularistic humanism of the Renaissance tradition placed such a premium is a false notion. Man as a creature has no rights of any kind 'natural' to him or more clearly no rights which he does not owe to the goodness and benevolence of his Creator. The rights he has, including the right to personal freedom

are those conferred on him by God. Freedom then, as a right conferred by God carried with it responsibility. Man is accountable to God for the way in which he uses his freedom. His is a steward of that which is given to him as a gift.

One might say that such a religious reference is not necessary in order that one might use his freedom with a sense of responsibility. The idea that freedom should be used responsibly is not, it might be contended, a revolutionary idea. This may be so, but the question of sanctions is involved here. What is the sanction for bidding man to use his freedom responsibly?

The Legacy of Secularistic Humanism

In modern times, partly as a legacy of secularistic humanism coming down from the Renaissance, we have practically ceased to talk of sanctions except in a legal and juridical sense. Legal sanctions can, however, be outwitted by the clever. There can be collusion between those who administer law and others to defeat the purposes of law. In other words external sanctions are feeble and can be made ineffective by those who wish to do so. I think, if pressed, we will all recognize that ultimately the only sanctions for responsible behaviour are those that are internal to man. But many are content to recognize the *internal source in the reason of man*. This is in the true tradition of the Renaissance spirit. It was the fashion a few years ago for some men in Indian universities to swear by the names of H. G. Wells and Bertrand Russell. Planning for health, welfare and education was thought to be the only requirement for creating a responsible society. With proper material conditions and liberal education man's reason would make him act in society like a responsible being. When H. G. Wells' last testimony was given to the world in his 'Mind at the end of its tether' it came as a rude shock to his disciples that this prophet of secular humanism could see only the extinction of homo-sapiens as its ultimate goal.

The present state of secular thought with regard to the nature of man is one of bewilderment and confusion. Man's mind is unravelling with a frightening speed dangerous secrets of Nature and yet man's reason has not roused any confidence that it can use these secrets with any sense of responsibility. Secular humanism has trusted human reason to make man morally a responsible being. The fact is that human *reason* can recognize only *prudence* as the spring of moral action. The basis of altruism is only egoism, for individual welfare is possible only when society is healthy! In all the grandiloquent speeches one hears outside Christian circles concerning the need for a more responsible society and in most of the seemingly learned treatises on the social obligations of the individual, the motive that is appealed to more often than not is self-interest! The basis of social enlightenment is enlightened self-interest. You cannot but do this if you depend on reason as the only sanction for morality. It is difficult to discover in the natural reason of man any ground why one should concern himself with his neighbour's good as an end in itself. The tragedy of the whole approach lies in the fact that it forgets that self-interest is the primary and root cause of man's irresponsible behaviour in society and in appealing to such a motive we can never make a man altruistic. 'Do men gather grapes of thorns or

figs of thistles? (Mt. 7:16). Prudence may dictate that the interests of the self are sometimes served better by anti-social behaviour than by responsible social behaviour, and if one counters that this is short-sighted policy, the reply to it may be that one's life is after all short!

Christian Basis of Responsibility

As I stated in my article in the last Number of this *Journal*, the Christian looks for the sanctions of morality (responsible behaviour is moral behaviour) in God's nature; in the nature of that which alone is true ultimately. The Universe is morally conditioned, for it is the creation of a moral personality, and to be in tune with that which is true to the heart of the Universe, one ought to be morally good himself. If he is otherwise, he is out of tune with that which is true to the heart of the Universe—he is an alien in the Universe, lost and lonely. Christ commands that one should love his enemies that he may be like his heavenly Father. To be like the heavenly Father, one must be willing to live in the Father's realm, to live in communion and fellowship with Him. But to live in such a state of fellowship, it is assumed that one is at-one with the heavenly Father.

To be at-one with the heavenly Father, two conditions are required. In the first place one ought to renounce all false philosophies such as that as an autonomous being man has certain 'natural rights'. But the renunciation of such a false philosophy is not easy, for such a philosophy arises sometimes not out of deliberate atheism but out of man's pride and egoism. There is nothing more immediately superficially true to man than his own self. The world he knows is often the world his self has created. To give up the self is to give up all that has been most immediately real to him. Therefore as a second condition for such a fellowship, there is demanded an act of will—an act of surrender to God. This is being reconciled to God in Christ through Christ's atonement. With this act of will, in this act of surrender, the little world that man has created for himself, and in which he has made a prisoner of himself, disappears and he steps into the larger world of God. He has attained to sonship and he is no longer an alien in the world—an alien to that which is true to the heart of the Universe. He finds himself in a new relationship—a new relationship to God, the world and man, and this new relationship is the spring of his moral action.

Freedom as a 'natural right' is illusory. It is limited in all directions. The 'natural man' has no more freedom than his 'nature' allows him and that 'nature' allows him precious little. He is at the mercy of his instincts and passions. His freedom in society is also greatly circumscribed. We all know the story of the man who in his leisurely walk wielding his umbrella struck a passer-by with it. When the passer-by protested, he replied that he had the freedom to wield his umbrella as he liked, to which the rejoinder was 'Sir your freedom ends where my nose begins!' But there is no limitation to the freedom to walk the second mile; there is no limitation to behave responsibly in society. Freedom is real only when the will of man purposes good. But such a will is not the will of the 'natural man' but of the redeemed. This is the teaching of the Reformers, of the Bible, of the Christian Faith.

A Philosophy of Society

In order to be able to inculcate the habit of responsible social behaviour in the individual, even the secularist must have a philosophy of society. The Renaissance rediscovered the individual but it had no clear conception of society. It is doubtful if a purely secular outlook can ever develop a philosophy of society. It may have a sociology, i.e., a descriptive science of the evolution of society. Sociology, however, cannot supply a social ideal unless it ceases to be a descriptive science and becomes a normative science. Ethics deals not with what is but with what ought to be. I am conscious that attempts have been made to derive 'what ought to be' from what is. At best such attempts can give us only a very tentative and relative notion of what 'ought to be'. I said that while the Renaissance rediscovered the individual, its ideology had no clear conception of society. English Liberalism of the last century and the earlier years of this century followed the lead of the Renaissance and defined freedom atomistically. The doctrine of *laissez-faire* expresses the spirit of British Liberal thought which now is practically dead. The philosophy of *laissez-faire* was extreme individualism. There were many good Christians who believed that since Christ taught the value of an individual, *laissez-faire* was quite Christian in spirit.

Christian Faith has a philosophy of society. Society is as clearly comprehended in the purposes of God as the individual himself. God created not only Adam but Eve, i.e. a family. God called not only an individual to serve Him but a nation. Social and individual values are emphasized in the Gospels. The shepherd no doubt goes out in search of the one sheep that is lost from his hundred, but the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister and lay down his life as a ransom for many.

We admitted that the old British Liberalism is no longer of any influence. But there are still men in many countries to whom free enterprise is a religious conviction. Such people, despite strong individualistic tendencies, perhaps believe in the necessity to preserve a certain social ideal, even as the old Liberalism to be fair to it, did believe. Such people however under-rate the strength of egoistic passion in man, and egoistic passion may continuously motivate men to act anti-socially. This is not a matter of speculation but a fact of observation. But what answer has our contemporary secular society found for this? The answer is that the State should be given the power to impose controls with a view 'to coercing the anarchy of conflicting human interests into some kind of order'. Our modern editions of Liberals object to this and perhaps with some justification. It may be that there is no other way of dealing with egoistic passion.

A refined version of a State armed with power to impose controls is the Welfare State! The practices of the Welfare State are however sometimes not many steps removed from the practices of a totalitarian State. The point is that while secular thought may perhaps be ready to recognize the strength of man's egoistic passion, being secular, it fails to see that egoistic passion is only a symptom of a deep-rooted disease of man, viz. sin, man's alienation from God. *As long as we have a sinful society State controls are necessary, and the least of evils to deal with*

an evil situation is the Welfare State. But the problem of responsible behaviour in society may still remain. This problem can be dealt with only by a religious approach, by the Christian approach. The Christian view of freedom eventually is that man has freedom only to do the right. He may do wrong but that is misusing freedom. It is sin. So man will know how to use freedom only when he is redeemed from sin. All this means that democracy can grow only in a truly Christian soil, that secular foundations are feeble to sustain democracy.

Democracy and Technology

Now let us turn our attention to evils which are the result of human culture being increasingly moulded by technology. This topic is well covered in contemporary literature relevant to the subject. Nevertheless there are one or two points which have not received the attention they deserve.

We all recognize that one of the evil results of a technological civilization is the increasing depersonalization of man. There are several factors which are responsible for this de-personalization. We have clearly recognized up to now certain of these factors. The impersonal rôle, for instance, that a factory hand plays in the vast organization of men and machinery is one of the clearly recognized factors, and industrial welfare in progressive countries is trying to tackle it. But there are other subtle influences contributing to this process of depersonalization which are not yet clearly recognized.

Democratic ideology has contested and rightly so, the Marxist thesis that the most intelligible and the only valid interpretative category of human activity and history, the only value ascribable to man the individual, is the economic value. No doubt we are told that in Communist societies cultural values as such are not neglected but that they are only weaned away from bourgeois preferences and recreated in the interests of the common man. The question is not whether a Communist society makes provision for the cultural interests of the common man but what value eventually it places on man himself. The issue is not the recognition of the need of culture empirically and pragmatically, but whether you recognize that there is something inherent and innate in the nature of man which needs satisfaction not only economically but culturally and spiritually. If the supreme interpretative category of human activity and history is the economic, man is reduced eventually to an economic animal. Democratic ideology naturally and rightly recoils from such a position. But paradoxically democracy is forced to acquiesce in practice to that which it denies in theory! In a super-industrial and technological civilization economic activity over-shadows every other activity. Industrial enterprise based on an ever-expanding scientific discovery and knowledge can hardly ever be static. Such an enterprise is always producing new things and is creating new wants in man and society. Furthermore in a free society under the compelling conditions of competition entrepreneurs can survive only if they go one better than their competitors. So there is an ever-expanding production and manufacture of new lines. While all this is in a sense undoubtedly to the benefit of the consumer in numerous ways, nevertheless what were luxuries once become in course of time necessities. Competitive industry

in order to thrive is compelled to create new necessities. Man's life becomes increasingly complicated economically and industrial enterprise over-shadows every other enterprise. Industrial production becomes the most dominant engagement of a people. And so you talk of the population of a country in terms of 'man power', parallel to the 'horse power' that the mechanically driven machinery in the factories possesses. The concept of 'man power' is primarily (excepting in war) an economic concept expressing an economic value, just as 'horse power' in its utility expresses an economic value. This is naked de-personalization of man the individual and an estimate of him in only an instrumental capacity.

There is another subtle influence of a super-industrial and technological civilization that contributes to the de-personalization of man. Highly industrialized communities tend to develop an exclusively activist civilization. Life for individuals in such societies is caught up in a whirl of activities and there is little leisure for the more elevated pursuits of culture. Activity becomes a second habit and hence the contradiction that, tired and weighed down by ceaseless activity, people ask for leisure—a 48 hour week, then a 42 hour week and then a 36 hour week—and when they obtain it they do not know how to use it or relax in it. Anatole France writing in one of his works *The Red Lily* puts into the mouth of one of the characters the following words to describe Napoleon's character: 'A poet, he knew no poetry but that of action. His great dream of life was earth-bound. . . . His youth, or rather his sublime adolescence endured to the end, because all the days of his life were powerless to form in him a conscious maturity. Such is the condition of all men of action. They live entirely for the moment, and their genius is concentrated on one single point. They do not grow. The hours of their lives are not bound together by the chain of grave disinterested reflexion. They do not develop; one condition merely succeeds another in a series of deeds. Thus they have no inner life. The absence of inner life is particularly noticeable in Napoleon. . . . He lived outside himself.'¹

The words would obviously be untrue if used as a general characterization of all the peoples in industrial countries. But they more or less characterize a general tendency among many caught up in the vortex of industrial and commercial activity.

A person who is thus dwarfed intellectually and spiritually by continuous activity is conquered easily by forces that work for de-personalization. Unable to judge for himself, he is led by the nose by others. Propaganda of even the lowest type triumphs. The success of the sensational Press in many countries is the measure of man's intellectual and spiritual immaturity and a testimony that men in large numbers live either a sub-personal life or are de-personalized.

De-personalization, of course, eliminates individuality and this leads to 'massification' of men. This 'massification' is a growing phenomenon even in democratic countries and is a tragedy and a danger because democracy cannot survive under such a condition. Leaders in democratic countries recognize this. Now this raises the question at which perhaps some will scoff and which to many may appear as savouring of an ante-deluvian mind. The question is whether *unrestrained* indus-

¹ Anatole France *The Red Lily* Tr. Stephens.

trialization is not fraught with dangers to democracy, and whether industrialization should not be kept within limits? Let me not be misunderstood. I am not pleading for Gandhian economics. Such economics are clearly impossible at this late day. Moreover we cannot under-rate the good that industrialization aided by technology has done for man. But unless we are prepared to allow industrialization to defeat democracy and make a shambles of it, we must keep it within limits. Of what benefit is it to man to be rich in earthly comforts and possessions, if the price he has to pay for them is his soul? While democracy cannot thrive in poverty, filth and squalor, it is doubtful if it can survive under conditions that lead to 'massification' of men. While in a country like India the standards of living must be improved and that quickly too if democracy is to become stable, we should lose democracy eventually or the essential values for which it stands, if we make idols of these standards and worship at their altars. We cannot avoid the moral consequences from either low economic standards of living or high economic standards of living, or standards of living that have no ceiling fixed for them, and consequently soar ever higher. We need to discuss this question seriously.

My purpose in writing this article has been to invite serious thinking in this country concerning a doctrine of man and of society. In the absence of a true doctrine of man and of society we shall only face bewilderment, such as many nations that have tried democracy for long are facing today. May not this doctrine be found in the Bible?



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