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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

CONFERENCE ON RELIGION IN THE AGE OF SCIENCE STAR ISLAND, N. H.

This conference "seeks to bring together for creative interchange and development people who are concerned with the formulation of more effective doctrines and practices for human salvation in the light of contemporary knowledge. The conference is established in the faith that there is no wall isolating any department of human understanding, and that, therefore, any doctrine of human salvation cannot successfully be separated from the realities pictured by science." In the summer of 1954 the conference discussed "the Nature of Science." In 1955 "the search for integration of scientific and religious concepts" was continued by asking: "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?"

Though he was not the first speaker, the keynote was sounded by Dr. Edwin Prince Booth, professor of historical theology, Boston University. He presented as the most important message of the Christian Church of today the words of Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:1): "Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee." When the Bible speaks of the "Son of Man" or of the "Suffering Servant," Booth thinks the whole suffering, heart-broken human race is meant. When we read that "the Son of Man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, we think," Booth went on, "of the imminence of Divine Judgment. Does this not mean that social justice is coming? The whole concept of lifting the struggling, heartbroken human race into an even better environmental adjustment is the essence of Judgment Day." Fully aware of the fact that this contradicts traditional Christian beliefs, the speaker went on to say that no intervention of sources other than man had ever helped man. Therefore he rejects "every so-called miracle in every religious tradition." Now Dr. Booth announced the idea around which all the other addresses revolved: "We may get a clearer statement only if humanity, unapologized for and uncringingly, be made the basis for the new epic of thought." Dr. Booth said he was pleading for a humanism undefeated, for a liberalism grander than it had been before, for a centrality of word made flesh, for the dignity of human nature, and for the tremendous unique experience of being a thinking son of man in the living present.

Dr. Henry Nelson Wieman, emeritus professor of the philosophy of religion, University of Chicago, delivered three addresses concerning man and religion. In the second address he touched directly the theme

of the conference. He defined religion "as a commitment to that which will lead man on to the good and better. . . . The ultimate good . . . is to act always toward finding those conditions which contribute most to an appreciative understanding between you and the other people." Religion tries to solve the problem of what has such a character as to transform, if man but gives himself to it, when he cannot transform himself. New ideas do not come into the brain by themselves, Wieman continued, they arrive there by a motivating power we call "creativity." Creativity, then, transforms us from within, as we cannot transform ourselves. This spirit of creativity we call God. The man Jesus is not God, Wieman said. Working through Jesus was this creativity, which rose to power whenever he was in the presence of others. The fishermen were transformed. History was thus altered not because of Jesus the man, but because of the creativity within him. It is most reassuring, so Wieman concluded this address, to know that deep within us there is great promise. Every man who can free this creative force within him will become master over the destructive forces within him.

"Man, a Creature of the Earth," was discussed by Dr. G. A. Huntsman, professor of zoology, University of Toronto. Unless one had heard Huntsman later as he defined God, much of his address would have been completely misunderstood. During an informal discussion he said: "Nature is God." In the course of his lecture he had, among other things, something to say about the purpose and meaning of life. It ran about thus. The essential problem lies in the wholeness of the details we know. By our knowledge we have isolated the parts. The relationship of these parts presents an enigma. Knowing is very transient. Man, the creature of the earth, can still be happy in spite of and beyond his knowledge of the elements of his experience. He can sense himself as an element in a vast whole. (Could this, perhaps, be Schopenhauer speaking?) He concluded by saying that man is far more wonderful than we can conceive. Even more wonderful, Huntsman said, must be his Creator. It is quite evident that we are merely small parts of a tremendous and continuously changing whole. We should strive to learn how to play our roles in this whole with the firm assurance that they are significant and that, if in the ceaseless change that forms time we seem to pass away from this life just as we come into it, we will, nevertheless, in some manner or other share in the eternal future even as we are products of the eternal past. We have been created by the whole, so Goodman stated, and we shall share in future creation.

Dr. Henry A. Murray, director of the Psychological Clinic, Harvard University, denounced orthodox Christianity for blocking the progress of the evolution of religion. Dr. M. F. Ashley Montague, professor of anthropology, Rutgers University, as he developed the theme "The Nature of Human Nature," insisted that he had demonstrated scientifically "that there is no original sin." Dr. Alfred E. Emerson, professor of zoology, Chicago University, addressed the conference on "The Individual and the Superorganism," and on "Ethics as a Result of Evolution." The superorganism is the group system which stands above the individual. It is a biological necessity, this philosophy insists, that the individual should yield his independence to become a subordinate part of the superorganism. This philosophy is a natural consequence of the cell theory and the theory of adaptation and specialization. It uses the biological idea that the organism is a co-operative organization of cells, each sacrificing its individuality for the superorganism. Man has achieved his highest purpose in life if he does likewise. In continental Europe the cell theory is being seriously questioned, but here in America it is the basis for a philosophy which has given our world the welfare state and has influenced the spread of Communism.

The endeavors of this conference indicate that Spencer is still the fashionable philosopher (*Modephilosoph*) of the English-speaking world, as Karl Heim has put it. If one has spent a week with people who are friendly and kind and hospitable but whose hopes and aspirations do not rise above that which is relative and transient, one is left alone among the many. Then comes a measure of appreciation of the fellowship of which John speaks (1 John 1:7), which rests on the Absolute and is engendered by the cleansing and sanctifying blood of Jesus Christ.

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