

RELIGION AND TECHNOLOGY

[Mr. Alexander F. Skutch has contributed some useful and interesting essays in our pages. We take pleasure in introducing this article with an extract from his recent letter :—

"I owe a great debt of gratitude to THE ARYAN PATH and to you for making it known to me, which you did, as you may recall, by asking me to send a contribution after reading something that I wrote for *The Scientific Monthly* about a decade ago. After years of a naturalist's wandering life in tropical America, during which I read few books and met scarcely any educated people, I had not long before settled on a farm in a wild part of Costa Rica and was attempting to orient myself in philosophy and religion and discover the significance of some of the things I learned from observation of nature. To one in the situation in which I then found myself, THE ARYAN PATH was a godsend. With its thoughtful articles presenting a wide variety of opinion on the most diverse topics and its many book reviews each month, it helped me to become acquainted with both contemporary and ancient thought as I believe no other periodical could have done. If even people in cultured communities find THE ARYAN PATH intellectually and spiritually stimulating, what must it be to one who dwells on a backwoods farm !

"Hence it is with sincere appreciation that I send my congratulations to THE ARYAN PATH on its completion of twenty-five years of service to liberal thought everywhere, and my wishes for an even more brilliant future."—ED.]

Man's recently acquired ability to utilize some of the intrinsic, constitutional energy of matter is being used by publicists and politicians, now to fill us with dread, now to raise in our fickle minds the most flattering hopes. On the one hand, we are warned that a major war waged with nuclear weapons may destroy not only civilization but all terrestrial life. On the other hand, we are promised that if we can prevent war and develop nuclear energy for pacific ends, we shall transform human life almost beyond recognition, creating a world without hunger, dirt or disease, where crops never fail and food never spoils, where all our routine tasks are done

for us at the pressing of a button—in short, we shall dwell in an earthly paradise.

Both of these predictions, the dreadful no less than the hopeful, are too extreme, springing from an exaggerated notion of human power. It is most improbable that anything men can do will totally obliterate the animal and vegetable life of the continents, to say nothing of that in the oceans. And unlimited energy for industrial and domestic uses, even if we can procure it, is not by itself likely to bring about a significant increase in human felicity; because *the obstacles to our happiness are not in the external world so much as in ourselves.* Tech-

nological dreams for the reconstruction of society always lose sight of this inherent limitation, which religion, to its credit, has nearly everywhere recognized. Before we lose ourselves in fantastic visions of the happiness technology will bring us, we shall do well to pause and reconsider what religion and philosophy have had to say on this question.

The most fundamental difference between the religious and the technological approaches to human problems is that for religion man's chief need is to change himself; for technology, to alter his surroundings. The religious man believes that the chief obstacles to his happiness and the fulfilment of his being are internal, in the form of wrong views, vain desires, improper and emotional responses, the failure to understand his own nature and to accept the inevitable conditions of human life. To realize his highest destiny, he must first of all improve his own character: if he can adequately accomplish this, perhaps external barriers which at first appear insuperable will dwindle into inconsequential phantoms. The technological man, on the contrary, sees himself thwarted by external obstacles and deficiencies. It is the niggardliness of his environment that prevents his winning the best that life can give and becoming completely happy. Could he force the world to yield all that he needs and desires, in return for a very slight exertion by himself, his felicity would, he

believes, be perfect.

The contrast between these two ways of viewing life becomes clearest when we examine their extreme forms. Nearly every great religion and religious philosophy has held before itself the ideal of a man so complete in himself, so dedicated to spiritual or intangible values, that he could remain cheerful and self-contained no matter what terror and confusion prevailed in the world about him, no matter what accidents befell his own body. The impulsive natural man, demanding much from his physical surroundings and readily upset by external circumstances, can achieve such spiritual emancipation only through a profound inner transformation. The ideal of technology, on the other hand, is a world in which we can bring about the fulfilment of all our desires by pushing buttons and other simple manipulations demanding scarcely any human effort. To bring about this condition requires extensive and complicated alterations in the world about us, which was not made to be controlled with such ease, and a minimum of change in ourselves, even in the matter of muscular tension. I doubt if any religious teacher not blinded by fanaticism seriously believes that men can achieve good or satisfying lives wholly through changing themselves, or that any technologist with some experience in living imagines that men can be made happy or contented merely by the multiplication of devices and

processes such as he labours to perfect. But a wide gap separates our best religious thought from the prevailing technological opinion; and the whole destiny of mankind depends upon which of these two attitudes is allowed to give the dominant tone to human endeavour.

The notion that our own inadequacy is a chief obstacle to our happiness, our incompleteness and perversity the sources of our distress, can be traced far back into the dim mists that shroud dawning human thought. And since man is rarely satisfied to remain less perfect than he imagines that he might become, the suspicion that he was himself inadequate led him to take measures to alter himself. His earliest attempts to improve his own nature were as crude and blundering as the half-formed intellect that prompted them, but they indicated clearly in what direction he was groping. His first clumsy efforts were directed toward the alteration of his body rather than of his mind or spirit. An example of this tendency is the practice of certain South American tribes of puncturing or cutting the flesh in order to dispel fatigue and increase muscular endurance. The magical properties of the sharp instrument chosen for this purpose determined its effect. It was doubtless this illusion that through pain and lacerations strength and fortitude are increased that led to the scourgings, the ordeals, the grim mutilations which in many tribes were

inflicted upon the youths when they were initiated into the full privileges of manhood. The initiate often took a new name, signifying his "rebirth," the radical alteration of his character at this critical period of transition. The notion that it requires a second birth to make a man all that he ought to be has been carried over from the crude beginnings of religion in tribal ceremonies to our most spiritual faiths. The Hindu of the upper castes became "twice-born" through the study of the Vedas. Jesus declared: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

In other ways which it would be tedious to detail here, men at that stage of culture technically known as "savage" obeyed their intuition that only by changing themselves could they become adequate to the demands life made upon them. To participate in religious ceremonies, it was often imperative to abstain from certain foods and to be continent for a number of days before the ritual began. Sometimes the participants were obliged to submit to similar restrictions for an equal period after its conclusion, before they could resume their customary life. Success in the chase was in many tribes believed to depend upon the observance of similar taboos. And not only the men who went abroad to face the perils of the hunt, but also their wives and members of their family who stayed safely at home, were subject to

severe restrictions in the interest of the success of the enterprise. The idea underlying all these regulations, which to the modern mind appear so annoying and irrelevant, seems to have been that the man himself, rather than his surroundings or the agents he used, required modification in order to make him adequate to fill his part in the communal life. As in so many other instances in the history of religion, a true intuition gave rise to formalities largely useless and vain.

As religion became more spiritual, as it turned its attention from the preservation of a society to the self-realization or salvation of the individual, it retained this ancient belief that man himself requires transformation. But it became clear to those who thought most profoundly that the essential transmutation was in the spirit rather than in the body and that it was not to be effected by means so crude as scarification or other forms of mutilation and torture. For asceticism, which in its more violent forms reveals unmistakably its direct descent from the crude self-mutilation of savages, the most enlightened teachers substituted moderation or frugality. But that the transformation of the self is still an essential feature of religion is made clear by the current use of the word "conversion" to designate the acceptance of the religious attitude.

Even divested of all the futile and frequently bloody excesses which

marked the savage's attempts to improve his own nature, man's efforts to transform himself are too often fanatical and vain. At one extreme we have the shallow emotional flutterings which frequently pass as a religious "conversion"; at the other, grim stoical attempts to extirpate or suppress the greater part of our spontaneous impulses. The former are usually ineffectual; the latter, often injurious. But it would be folly to brush aside as fantastic and misguided an endeavour which since before the dawn of history has claimed so large a share of our best human energies. The unregenerate human animal, with all its raw impulses and all its wild desires, is ill adapted either to find happiness for itself or to fit into an orderly society. In other creatures, these impulses can achieve satisfaction only through the innate patterns of behaviour which we call instincts. Man, who ages ago lost the corresponding innate patterns, must depend upon education to effect the harmonious integration of his nature. Perhaps, with gentle nurture and understanding guidance, this harmonization could be accomplished during childhood and adolescence, so gradually yet so thoroughly that no radical alteration in later life would be necessary. But, even with the best of educations, I suspect, most of us would discover as we grew older that we had permitted certain sides of our complex nature to shoot rankly while other aspects were suppressed or distorted, and

that in order to become all that we might be, and to live with some satisfaction to ourselves and those about us, some comprehensive transformation was essential.

Although from the point of view of religion men are far less perfect than they should be, and most of the ills of mankind result from the inadequacy of men, for the technological transformation of the world men are in many respects better than they need be. The mass production of goods calls for great numbers of workers who endlessly perform simple operations requiring little thought or skill, or who simply watch over complicated machines. There is at the same time a demand for people of the highest intelligence and originality, or of great manual dexterity, whether in establishing and administering industries, developing technical processes or performing delicate manipulations in the manufacture of apparatus. But the posts which call for the fullest exercise of abilities of these sorts are far fewer than the people who might with proper training fill them. The countless men who perforce engage in work which does not give full play to their innate abilities feel suppressed, thwarted and dissatisfied. To live zestfully we must exercise our best faculties. But if our daily employment, far from demanding the fullest development of our innate capacities, holds them in check and thrall, there are other sides of our nature that not only

call for improvement, but may profitably be cultivated, in whatever station of life we happen to be cast. If a world dominated by technology does not ask of a man his best practical thought or his highest manual skill, a world inspired by religion will demand of him the fullest development of those faculties called moral and spiritual. Although it is conceivable that the masses of men will rapidly become too able for technology, they can never become too good for religion, to which the perfection of the man himself is more important than the quantity or even the quality of the merchandise he produces. Our spiritual nature is always capable of improvement; and in this direction at least no man or system can ever stop our growth or deprive us of that joy as of early youth which is its invariable accompaniment.

The second important difference between the religious and the technological attitudes concerns the recognition of values independent of mankind. The religious man acts upon the (at least tacit) assumption that such values exist; the technological man behaves as though nothing in the world is of any consequence apart from its service to man. To religion, certain places and objects are sacred; their exploitation is restricted or prohibited because they are held to be associated with interests or values other than our own. In the spontaneous fresh-

ness of their youth, many human races set apart as inviolate trees and groves whose majesty suggested that they were the abode of unseen spirits. Mountains, springs and rivers were sacred, because beloved by the gods or spirits which dwelt upon or in them. Animals were regarded as sentient beings whose life was dear to them and not to be lightly taken. It appears that man passed through a stage when, had he not been driven by the imperious demands of his stomach, he would have refrained from the exploitation of practically any of the living things which surrounded him. With the passing of animism and the slow growth of monotheism, the idea of God imparted a fresh significance to all creation. He had made the world for His enjoyment, hence it possessed absolute value apart from the transient satisfactions of men.

The question of values apart from our own is a matter of great philosophic perplexity, and is perhaps incapable of a final solution which will dispel all sceptic doubts. But the man endued with religious feeling is aware of a spontaneous natural piety, a filial regard for the earth which supports him and a brotherly affection for all creatures which share life with him. Although he may have outgrown the animistic beliefs of his ancestors, mountains and springs, trees and groves, and the creatures which dwell in them, are in a sense sacred to him, not to be wantonly exploited for his

material needs.

Modern technology is founded upon a quantitative science which refuses to admit the reality of that which cannot be weighed or measured by its instruments. True to the science which fathered it, technology recognizes no non-human values. Modern man, proficient in technical processes but with no restraining religion, ruthlessly exploits all things under the sun which may be made to serve his needs or flatter his whims, never asking whether by so doing he may be destroying values which escape his gross perceptions. The holy mountains are torn open for their minerals, the hallowed groves sawed into boards, the sacred streams polluted; everything it can reach, animate or inanimate, is so much grist for the technological mill. The contrast between the religious and technological outlooks becomes clear when we compare the Hindu and the European attitudes toward the cow. To the former, it is a sacred animal, which may be used with certain restrictions yet must be respected. To the Westerner, the cow is an object to be exploited *ad libitum*; its usability sets the only limit to its use. Piety rarely influences technology.

Since men chipped the first crude flints and rubbed sticks together to kindle a flame, they have always had some technology. Since they first worshipped gods in sticks and stones, they have produced no lasting culture without some religion.

The question confronting us today is not so much whether we shall choose to guide our lives by religion or by technology, as how we shall combine these two essential elements of human life, the relative weight we shall assign to each. Throughout by far the greater part of human history, technology has, at least ostensibly, deferred to religion. But, a little over three centuries ago, modern science began to undermine the foundations of traditional religion, while it gave increasing support to technology. The question which

now faces mankind is this: Can technology so transmute the world that we can live with some satisfaction to ourselves and our neighbours without chastening our raw, undisciplined human nature? Or, in order to fulfil our highest aspirations, must we first of all regenerate ourselves under the inspiration of religion, depending upon technology merely to provide that material support without which the human animal cannot exist?

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