

PROFESSOR LASKI GETS RELIGION

JAMES S. THOMSON

THE appearance of a Second World-War in less than half a century has inevitably provoked many questions about the destiny of mankind. There has been much wistful expectancy that the wrath of man might be turned to the praise of God by a revival of religious conviction. Surely these dreadful disasters should have an arresting effect on the spread of secular attitudes towards life, and ought to act as a potent weapon for "stabbing the spirit broad awake!" Long ago, Heraclitus endowed strife with a creative function in the cosmic economy, and Aristotle, in the theory of tragedy, maintained that suffering has a purgative effect on the souls of those who endure its agony. The Christian faith gives a central place to the Cross. Many have been asking, therefore, whether what one writer has described as "the vast apocalypse of evil" might not become the voice of a divine entreaty, calling men to repent and consider anew the spiritual dimensions of life.

After the First World-War, numerous commissions and conferences assembled to study and discuss the sad state of modern civilization. World-wide movements of evangelism were stimulated. But they were evidently powerless to assist the decay that has eaten into the spiritual fibre of the twentieth century mind, and, except for sporadic appearances of re-awakened religion, there was no evident return of the household of faith.

The victory of the United Nations finds us in a chastened mood. Feelings of exultation are tempered by a sense that the crisis in civilization has not been resolved by the end of hostilities. Rather, we are now being given a brief period of opportunity in which to settle our world problems by methods of reason rather than violence. But the immensity of our task is not matched by the assurance of our hope. There are plenty of "blue-prints" for a new world-order, but the grave concern that besets the morally intelligent is whether we have the spiritual confidence to create what our minds conceive.

More than a passing interest is aroused, therefore, when Professor Harold J. Laski has found himself under compulsion, during the course of the recent conflict, to write an essay¹ on the thesis: "The most important war-aim that is before us is

1. *Faith, Reason and Civilization*, by Harold J. Laski (New York: 1944).

the recovery of a faith by which we can all of us stand." This little book commands attention for several reasons. First of all, there is the prestige of the writer. As a political scientist, he occupied a position of wide influence. He would not disavow the description of a left-wing intellectual, and he has placed himself on record as judging the most significant event in recent history to be the Russian Revolution. His writings have a prophetic character alike in his rigorous analysis of the contemporary *malaise*, and in his sense of urgency that the time for recovery is short. Moreover, his practical sense of politics absolves him from the condemnation of Mr. Shaw's jibe that "Platitudes are principles without a programme." Then, he is, in Emerson's description, if not quite in his classical manner, a "representative man." Professor Laski says with force and eloquence what many others, with less intellectual capacity and literary power, are feeling in their minds—that "the acids of modernity" have dissolved the long-accepted bases of religious belief. Christianity is thought obsolete, and unable to recover the lost vitality of its youth. The doctrinal assertions of its professed exponents fail to win the intellectual assent of "the modern mind". But the notable feature of Professor Laski's thought is his realization that negative criticism is inadequate as an attitude of mind for rebuilding the world. You cannot create a new order by reiterating what you do not believe. The need is for a positive faith securely based on affirmative convictions, and the purpose of his book is at once to declare such a necessity and to announce the writer's discovery of what will meet it.

I.

Professor Laski, then, has got religion, or rather, religion has got him. Not that he has ever been indifferent to the place of religion as an historical force. He is too able and honest a scholar to have neglected, in the copious course of his writings, a human energy of such power. But what was hitherto an objective interest has now become a subjective experience. And so he has given us a book which should not be set aside lightly, because he is writing with sincerity and eloquence on a subject that should be of central and decisive concern for every serious mind.

The essay is an attempt to supply what has already been adumbrated in a larger work², also written during the war. In

2. *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, by Harold J. Laski (New York, 1943.)

the opening chapter of the previous book, he had remarked on the spiritual importance of our time, pointing out that a great mass of people were living in "bewilderment without philosophy." They needed a new access of vital energy to be supplied by a religious spirit, which Professor Laski defined as "an insistent call to devote oneself to an end beyond the private satisfaction of personality". Here, then, is the answer he, himself, has found to the call.

Professor Laski recalls what has been described as "the lost radiance of the Christian religion." There was a time, he tells us, during the early centuries of our era, when the Christian faith won a notable victory over the secularizing tendencies of paganism, by giving men a cause for which they were willing to live, and, if need be, to die. We require a similar faith "to revitalize the human mind," but he does not think we should make any futile attempt to recapture the glow and strength of early Christianity. We must now look for the same effect, but it must be created by a very different cause. The magnificent achievement of the early Christian faith arose from sources of conviction that are no longer available. The processes of criticism have dried up their historical veracity. In our time, any system of religious belief that presumes to direct its adherents to the existence of a supernatural realm cannot hope to claim our honest assent. The Cartesian revolution has enthroned the scientific method, and therefore has liberated us from the entanglements of faith in a divine revelation. Professor Laski is willing to concede that there may be a few elect persons, endowed with a special spiritual genius, who can enjoy the emotional experiences of lonely company with the Eternal, but the great mass of mankind must look for their hope of salvation in a very different direction and on very different terms.

The essayist believes we need not look beyond the present scene for saving grace. Indeed, the great emancipation has come, and is now making itself evident to enlightened eyes. It is in process before us, and the way of wisdom is to repeat and believe its gospel. The favoured land of its visitation is Russia, and the faith with which we are confronted is the prophetic message of Marx and Lenin. History has repeated itself, so that what happened in the first Christian age has returned to visit the world. In Russia men have found a cause for which to live, and are being transported to a new experience of satisfying life by the assured hope of a mighty salvation. The Communist adventure supplied the same sense of worth to every day exist-

tence that once was realized by the Christian gospel. Here, then, is where Professor Laski has got religion, or rather religion has got him.

Our preacher of Leninism is no uncritical spectator of the Soviet scene. In the course of his writings he has been, as he continues to be, a shrewd and outspoken critic of Communism in action. He has never trodden the narrow path of the party line. But the defects of practical Communism are for him faults of expression rather than of essence. You cannot have a tumultuous upheaval like the Russian Revolution without ugly and even repellent happenings. When a volcano pours its lava over the face of the earth, roses do not spring up in its pathway. Revolutions can hardly be expected to exhibit the tranquil solemnity of meetings for prayer. But the very extravagance of the Russian experiment confirms Professor Laski in his sense of historical parallelism with early Christianity, when the same crude and violent phenomena also appeared. At least, the two movements accomplished the same great end, only with this significant difference, that the Russian Revolution has shed the encumbrance of untenable theological beliefs, and has parted company with the entanglement of dubious historical facts. Moreover, Communism promises salvation here and now in this world, and in terms of real material values, compared with the postponed benefits of Christianity that were to be realized in a world yet to come. Thus the Communist faith is an expurgated republication of essential Christianity, supplying the same values without its philosophical defects.

In essence, what we are invited to accept in this essay is man's complete faith in himself. There was a time when this faith drew its assurance from the sense of a divine origin and destiny, but now it finds a new and more palpable inspiration from mankind as a whole. The larger social solidarity of man must supply the focus of individual loyalty and devotion. The supra-personal replaces the supernatural. Where men once lived for God, they now must live for their fellow-men. The new faith by which we shall be justified in the twentieth century is in Humanity. When this sense of identity with a common destiny which we can create for ourselves comes upon the mind, new values disclose themselves: life gets a sense of purpose, and we undergo that radical experience which converts us from being ego-centric and selfish into becoming men who find the meaning of existence in devotion to what lies beyond us. This, we are assured, is what has hap-

pened in Russia, and it is the very gospel of salvation for the whole world.

II.

The tracing of historical parallels is a fascinating exercise, but it is not without its dangers and temptations. An argument from analogy is notoriously deceitful. The study of history inevitably provokes suggestive similarities, but the student must test his subjective inferences by careful research into objective facts.

Presumably the Christians who lived during the first centuries of our era have as much claim as Professor Laski to be heard concerning what happened to them. And, fortunately, they have left us a considerable literature that has been preserved and studied with a scientific carefulness accorded to few other writings. Beginning with the New Testament, these early Christian writers surely demand closest study by anyone who proposes to give an account of their experiences. It is true, as Professor Laski says about them, that they had a marvellous sense of new and transforming life, giving fresh meaning to existence and endowing them with an assurance of hope and salvation, but it is not true that they will confirm Professor Laski's explanation of what wrought so great a change.

In the essay under review, we are informed concerning early Christianity that "The central fact in the movement is unmistakable. It is the recovery by man of belief in himself." Unfortunately, no authorities from the early literature of Christianity are cited to support this thesis. Even more unfortunately, it would be extremely difficult to do so. On the contrary, page after page from volume after volume can be adduced to establish the thesis that man had completely lost belief in himself. Beginning with the classical epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, and moving forward through the whole library of the Fathers to the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, the central fact is unmistakable that the men who were swept along by the Christian gospel had the most acute and desperate sense of impotence to save themselves. Indeed this very experience of despair was an essential element in what was accomplished in their lives by the act of God. An even more serious omission in Professor Laski's analysis is almost complete lack of reference to the figure of the Saviour. In his book on "St. Francis of Assisi," the late Mr. G. K. Chesterton remarks on biographers who "may try to tell the story of a saint without God: which is

like being told to write the life of Nansen and forbidden to mention the North Pole." Surely it is an astounding performance to give an account of early Christianity in which the only account given of the place of Jesus is that "it is hard to read the New Testament and discover in the central figure of its narrative any deep concern with the workaday world."

In the course of his book, Professor Laski continuously suggests that the historical facts on which Christianity is supposed to rest have been reduced by higher criticism. This conclusion is not unexpected when we read his acknowledgments to the work of Professor Kirsopp Lake and Mr. J. M. Robertson. But neither of these critics, nor, for that matter, anyone else, can deny that the early Christians, whether they were deluded or not about the origin of their faith, as a matter of recorded fact, did claim that their experience of salvation derived solely from Jesus Christ, and to explain it otherwise is to give an account totally different from what they had to say for themselves.

III.

These criticisms, which are offered against Professor Laski's analysis of early Christianity, have a deeper significance than calling attention to the inadequacy of his historical method. They suggest that the parallelism between early Christianity and modern Communism may be more apparent than real. Indeed, it is a sense of contrast rather than similarity that meets us. And this, in turn, leads on to further questions.

There are limits to what history can teach us about truth. Rather, where the historian leaves off, the philosopher must begin—only his interpretations must not become fanciful flights of reconstruction divorced from facts. There can be no doubt that the people of Russia have gone through a transforming experience, and that they have had a new access of vital energy through participation in a vast social experiment. Moreover, they have been given a sense of material security and a hope of economic improvement for which the common people everywhere seek with great earnestness. These are attainments to which we may well look with encouragement in the effort, which must become a major engagement of every worthy social order, to make available the wealth of the world for the whole community of men. Confidence in the possibility of such an achievement would undoubtedly have an emancipating effect on multitudes

of people, who would thereby have their minds relieved from burdensome pre-occupation with the problems of physical existence. But the question thrust upon us by this essay is whether participation in a society which guarantees such benefits can provide a religious faith to satisfy the entire nature of man.

Professor Laski makes large, almost breath-taking, assumptions on issues that have been discussed for centuries. Here, for example, is one he describes as "simple but important." It is that "When the drive of some given society is towards an effort to make its material circumstances favourable to mass well-being, the inner life of its citizens will be shaped towards the realization of happiness." This, of course, is the Marxist philosophy which, contrary to popular misrepresentation, does not teach the unreality of spiritual values, but does maintain that the "inner life" is an emergence from material conditions. It is the very antithesis of the Christian gospel, which proclaims in the words of Jesus: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." There have been false and mutilated versions of Christianity that profess indifference to the material wellbeing of men, and fasten complete attention on the salvation of the individual soul, but there are two historical observations to be made. First, the long and impressive record of human effort to emancipate men from physical degradation and material inequality, including programmes of Socialism, has taken place almost exclusively within cultures that derive their finest values from the teachings of Christianity. In making this statement, there is no call to defend the miseries and disabilities that continue to afflict multitudes in lands where Christian teaching has been long maintained. But it is a matter of historical fact that the will and purpose to remedy these distresses has emerged not out of favourable material conditions but from the ethics of a spiritual faith. The second observation is, there is no historical proof that civilizations with a high standard of general wellbeing have produced the greatest number of happy people. The United States of America ought to be the happiest country on earth, but is it?

Professor Laski's reply may be foreseen. America and other capitalist countries are "acquisitive societies," in which the struggle for increase of individual wellbeing is the dominant motive of personal effort. In the Soviet Union, society is organized for a similar purpose, only the gratification of personal ambition is achieved through a sense of participation in a common

adventure. The term "acquisitive society" has entered into popular use through the title of a work written by Mr. R. H. Tawney, who is a colleague of Professor Laski in the London School of Economics. It will bear examination, and the question may be asked whether it is the society that is acquisitive or the people who compose it. Mr. Tawney contrasts the Acquisitive with the Functional Society, and points out that in the latter type of organization the performance of services rather than the attainment of personal happiness should be the motive of life. But, presumably for Professor Laski, the exercise of these functions would be to increase the wealth of society—in other words, the acquisitive aim is transferred from individuals to the State, but you still have an acquisitive society. Is this an infallible prescription for "the remaking of man"? The Marxist doctrine teaches that human nature will be transformed by exposing men to a social environment in which they will acquire a sense of purposive value through the services they can render to their fellow-men. Christianity teaches that the same result can be attained only by a personal response of self-offering to the very Source of their being, Who is a personal Creator, and whose nature is love. We now begin to see the very heart of Professor Laski's faith, which is to give to society the value of "God."

Recent experience will suggest serious hesitations to "the modern mind" about any quasi-religious faith that reposes its hope of salvation in a totalitarian creed of personal commitment to society, which, for purposes of organization, really means the State. The corporate organization of mankind is not necessarily beneficent: indeed, there is ample evidence that it can assume forms laden with hideous cruelty, the more so because of its impersonal character. In short, when society as a whole essays a moral rôle in ordering the lives of its citizens, it really derives its ethics from sources that are not inherent in its collectivist nature. So far as Russian Communism practises universal benevolence, it is fair to suggest that the standards employed can be traced directly to the Christian tradition in which Marxism was conceived and in which it still operates. There is nothing in the counsels of naturalism, or for that matter of humanism, to ensure or even to propose that the goods which are produced and the services which are rendered by Communist organization should be equitably distributed strictly on the basis of human need. Indeed, it must be maintained that any moral attitudes which can invoke the sustained allegiance of the human

spirit derive their values from super-natural sanctions, meaning by supernatural not some aloof and nebulous realm, but rather some profounder reality which is prior to and inherent in what we are accustomed to describe as the physical and material.

Professor Laski's essay deals almost exclusively with the subjective conditions of human transformation. There he has discovered for himself much that is valuable, and which therefore ought to be said at this high hour in human destiny. Man needs a faith, which will impart a new sense of value to existence, through which he will find something beyond himself for which to live. Nothing is so much required as the sweeping power of some magnificent enthusiasm for fuller life, which shall not be the privilege of the few, but the shared possession of all. In devotion to such a transmuting purpose, men might lose the weary lust for possession, power and position, out of which arise the rage of war and the cruelty of oppression. In calling attention to so great a need, and his own clear sense of it, this able writer has given us an impressive book. But, in spite of his distaste for the term, it needs to be said that you cannot have an intellectual apprehension of religion without a theology. That is to say, the object of faith demands definition in the mind of the believer. The people of Germany and Japan also trusted for their salvation to the society in which they lived, and fervently expected to find increase of their individual wellbeing, and even happiness itself, through participation in a supra-personal mass adventure. But the result was very dreadful, and is now a matter of historical record, issuing grave warning to all who ignore the central fact and figure that refuses to be dismissed from the scene of human history, Jesus Christ. For He did appear, and although Professor Laski has refused to deal with the record of fact that He did create the faith from which we still derive our most satisfying values, nevertheless, no criticism can dismiss Him. And whatever appears in history is the revelation of what lies beyond history. With that "something," call it an "x", or as religion describes it "God," faith cannot evade an encounter.