

# DETHRONED GODS

By ROBERT E. HOLLAND

**E**MINENT speakers and writers who have the public attention are constantly emphasising two things. First, they warn us, like the prophets of old, that we are heading for destruction; that, unless we change our course, fearful calamities are going to overtake us in the next few decades. President Truman, at the San Francisco Conference, talked gloomily of "the end of civilization, and a return to the darkest of the dark ages." He also referred to the discovery of new weapons of war, fantastically terrible in their operation.

If a third world war happens, it is definitely believed possible that a super-bomb or one of these 'fantastic' new weapons, could touch off a cosmic explosion. The result of that might be, either the extinction of all life on the planet, or such devastation as would dissolve civilization and condemn survivors to a brutish existence.

At best, conclusive victory by either side, without a world explosion, would probably mean world despotism and the end of human freedom. Imagine what the bureaucracy of a world government would be like, and the futility of any opposition? For humanity is still corruptible by absolute power.

Secondly, the modern prophets tell us, with one voice, that the problem, basically, is a spiritual one; that the threat of war will never be lifted until ethical standards are raised throughout the world; that is to say, until people line up in a common front of belief in God.

Probably most of us would agree that the human soul needs to be considerably purified before there can be any likelihood of salvation from war. Dare we hope that a cardinal creed of confession and prayer could be framed for universal acceptance by the world's leaders of religious thought? Would such a creed be likely to create world-wide religious enthusiasm? Could it possibly unite in brotherhood all Churches and all faiths and philosophies that are rooted in the knowledge and love of God?

It is to be feared that the time is not yet ripe for this. God has become manifest to men through many forms. When man passed from the purely animal stage and developed the capacity of thought, he became aware of a conviction, imbedded in his inner consciousness, that the world was created and is governed

by a mighty power, which also established Right and Wrong and implanted the sense of duty. This conviction, incapable of comprehension or disproof by the mechanism of reason, has moved men, through the ages, to praise the Creator for blessings and to implore His aid in suffering and sorrow.

Before Christ's revelation dawned, man for thousands of years personalized the qualities which he attributed to a Divine Being. He created gods by summoning to his aid superhuman power in many strange and puissant forms, sometimes repugnant to the enlightened vision of later times.

Such manifestations could be, and had to be, in the course of evolution, because God, by endowing man with free-will, had made him a partner in the scheme of creation, the supreme enterprise of establishing His kingdom on earth.

Without the background of ugliness and evil, there would be no canvas on which the picture of Beauty and Goodness could be limned. Christ knew that he could use His mighty powers for material ends, but His human frame resisted temptation through agonies, because the true light shone in His soul. The superhuman powers by whose aid ancient civilizations came to birth and flourished (Egyptian, Sumerian, Minoan, Babylonian, Sinitic, Greek, Roman and many others) all emanated from the throne through human desire, they were subject to human infirmity and temptation, like the "sons of God" in Genesis.

The old Gods perished as God's purpose fulfilled itself—Osiris, Mithras, Cybele, Zeus, and the 'jealous Gods' who ruthlessly massacred hordes of humble folks for the advancement of a favoured group. All were tainted by mortal frailty.

"God by God goes out, discrowned and disanointed.

But the soul stands fast that gave them shape and speech."

Nevertheless, the diverse races and groups and societies of men still cling jealously to their traditional modes of prayer and praise. They are at varying stages of enlightenment and will not yet give allegiance to one conception of God. Each flock listens for the summons of its own shepherd, whose voice it knows, and will be deaf to the voice of strangers. Wanderers are not yet aware that there is but one Door into the fold, and one Shepherd who can guide them to it. Still unloosed in the world of sense are many baleful forces summoned up by human desire and ambition.

It is certain that, in the fullness of time, all peoples of the earth will know Christ's revelation and obey his command to love God, and every man his neighbour as himself.

But, at the moment, unfortunately, Christianity is devalued in the estimation of non-Christian peoples for three quite understandable reasons:

First, because the democratic systems of government in lands where Christianity is professed appear to reflect materialistic rather than religious principles, with the result that the standard of public and private morality in such lands has declined steeply. Hence, incidentally, authoritarianism is regaining ground.

Secondly, because although the United Nations was sponsored largely by Christian peoples, its Charter makes no mention of the Divine Creator, nor does it exalt the morality acclaimed by Christians as the supreme principle and purpose of common action.

Thirdly, because the governments of Christian countries, in their conduct of international relations, appear to be motivated, not by a determination to uphold righteousness and liberty, but by selfish interests affecting their own welfare and survival. The peoples of professedly neutral countries appear to be sickened and alienated by the inhuman and sordid processes of war as exposed in Korea, and by the tragic sufferings of the non-militant population. Americans, as protagonists, are accused of predatory imperialism and warmongering.

The world's respect for Christianity can only be revived through 'witness'; that is to say, if concrete evidence is presented that Christianity sways the thoughts and conduct of those who profess it. Lacking this, missionary effort among 'benighted' peoples falls flat.

What action on our part is required?

First, every democratic country should remodel its system of administration from the foundation upwards, should amend and revivify its constitution, if outmoded, however hoary and venerated it may be, and however noble the concepts which it may have embodied at the epoch when it was set up.

Damning indictments can be framed against 'Constitutional rigidity' as illustrated in countries where it obtains. Many influential voices are today urging in the United States, for instance, that structural changes are now required in the American Constitution (sacreligious though it sounds), in order to adapt it to changed conditions. The argument is as follows:

The Constitution represented an enormous advance in political doctrine, and in the philosophy of human relationships, at the time when it was devised; and it might have continued to function triumphantly and beneficently, even to the present day, if it had been continually operated by leaders of the calibre of the Founders. But its concepts and mechanism have been misunderstood and mishandled with the result that men, in their instinctive and licensed 'pursuit of Happiness', have had no sure guidance as to their superior obligations under the Golden Rule—of Charity, and respect for lawful ordinance. 'Liberty' is a stimulating cry to men under bondage or newly released. It is not a positive ideal firing men's souls, because it is merely the denunciation of an evil state in which man has become mired through his own depravity.<sup>1</sup> It is not a perfection to be sought for its own sake, but the rewarding harvest of patient toil in pursuit of truth.

As an ancient writer said:—"Liberty can only consist in being able to do what one ought to do."

Again, while few would argue that a democratic government, 'of the people, by the people, for the people,' is infallibly representative of the whole people, and that its every ordinance and act ought to be accepted by the people without criticism, yet it is equally fallacious to imagine that such a government can be stable and beneficent if, in its day-to-day administration and in the conduct of foreign policy in particular, it is subject to constant attack and disparagement by pressure groups for political or venal ends. That is not a right which is indispensable for the enjoyment of liberty.

The fact that the heavily burdened Chief Executive is also the nation's titular head is a grave embarrassment for a modern administration. So too, the fact that the members of his Cabinet are not accountable to Congress.

Public feeling has been deeply shocked by revelations concerning organized crime and its tie-up with politics; concerning the operations of pressure groups and influence-peddlers at administrative centres; concerning the corruption of amateur sports through spread of a 'victory at all cost' doctrine; concerning juvenile delinquency and dope addiction; concerning the witch-hunting of public servants, futile inquests upon the administration's stewardship; and, in general, concerning the

<sup>1</sup>Lord Samuel, in his book *Belief and Action*, described liberty as "a negative concept, a removal of hindrances, the opening of a door."

paralysing effect of electioneering anxieties upon governmental leadership.

A Constitution may not be allowed to become merely a monument to past aspirations and exploits. It has to be reshaped to embody new resolve confronted with new conditions. Axioms enunciated as eternal truths need qualification in the light of later developments and fuller comprehension.

For instance, if it is true that all men are created equal, it cannot be denied that, as they grow, they exhibit marked inequality in respect of endowments and capacities; and their individual activities are not regarded equally. What is the inference which should be drawn from the 'equality' axiom? As St. Exupery wrote, "We cannot be equal unless we be equal in something"; that is to say, only things which exhibit some element of difference between them can be equal. Is that 'something' equality in the rights of God over men? Is it equality of opportunity for every individual (which, incidentally, may enable the man of rare ability to get ahead of his fellows)? Is it equality as regards voting power, or access to the amenities of life, or protection against the abuse of power, whether political or economic? Or what?

The true implications of equality need careful examination, because it is an explosive idea, particularly in politics, unless its basic relation with morality is clearly appreciated. Have we got to face up to the conclusion that there can never be any such thing as an absolute equality of all men upon earth as regards material environment; that the diversities between the world's multitudinous groups (miscalled 'races'), and their deep-rooted antagonisms, can never be obliterated; and that, even within national borders, absolute social equality can never be attained? Must we confess that, from a purely humanistic point of view, the inequality of man is manifest in every department of life and is likely to persist? If so, what is the significance of the equality before God, which we presumably commend?

Again, the Right to 'pursue happiness' is a nebulous phrase and needs clarification. Its misinterpretation might conduce to anarchy in private and class relationships, besides obscuring wider issues.

One of these wider issues concerns our concept of "duty." A simple illustration of the present-day debasement of the "duty" concept is to be found in a 'Medal of Honour' requirement—that award shall be made to one who has distinguished himself in battle "at risk of his life, *and above and beyond the*

*call of duty.*" What is supposed to be the limitation on the call of duty? Is it, perhaps, the individual's right to pursue happiness, or his right to liberty or to equality? Any such limitation seems oddly at variance with the ancient concept of a soldier's duty to his country. See the Funeral Oration of Pericles for the Athenian dead at Thermopylae.

He said of them: "a death such as theirs has been gives the true measure of a man's worth;—They resigned to hope their unknown chance of happiness—they ran away from the word of dishonor, but on the battlefield their feet stood fast, and in an instant, at the height of their fortune, they passed from the scene, not of their fear, but of their glory—men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it, who in the hour of conflict had the fear of dishonor always present to them."

President Lincoln's Gettysburg address strikes the same note. The ideal which should be regarded as supremely worthy of struggle and sacrifice is surely something greater than freedom and security, whether individual or collective.

These are some of the revision problems over which experts have long been arguing.

The objectives may be said to be:

(a) to purge the electoral system of admitted abuses, and in particular to ensure that American foreign policy shall not be shadowed and stunted by frequent elections. They may mean fun and profit for many, but they are not good business for the nation.

(b) to remodel relations between the Executive and the Legislative, so that the governmental machine, while strictly responsible to the people's will, as expressed at the last election, may be geared for rapid and effective action in moments of emergency when world issues arise affecting the security of the nation and the survival of democracy. It is a fallacy to imagine that the governmental executive ought to be continuously sensitive to shifts in public opinion demonstrated by Gallup poll or 'clamour' methods. There is a saying that the constitution in respect of the Executive's position and authority, is all "sail and no anchor". Fortunately, that is more witty than true.

(c) to stress for the people the true significance of their suffrage rights and responsibilities.

If a democratic Constitution can be presented to the public as a structure piously restored and perfected in the light of experience and based on the bedrock of moral principle, it will

shine in the hearts of the people, and guide and intensify their appreciation of life's true values.

Next, as regards the United Nations.

The labours of U. N. councils and commissions and specialized agencies are highly respected and appreciated by nations and peoples of the world. The General Assembly is a useful forum for the ventilation of international misunderstandings, and for the discussion of them with reference to principles which acknowledgedly ought to be paramount but are not. The Organization itself, however, as a factor for World Peace and for the elevation of humanity to a higher level, has unfortunately fallen into disrepute for reasons, largely connected with the Korean war, which need not be re-stated.

U. N. is not likely to regain credit and influence unless the nations and peoples of the world can manage to agree on the outline of a philosophy which would make the "Purposes and Principles" of its Charter a beacon of hope for all mankind. There is no sign at present, that this is likely to happen.

If the Charter were to endorse Christianity's claim that morality ought to be the supreme principle and purpose of common action, that would indeed be a "Witness" for belief in a Divine Creator.

Thirdly, as regards the motives which sway the governments of Christian countries in their conduct of international relations. General MacArthur uttered a profound truth at Washington when, speaking of the destructiveness of war and the likelihood of Armageddon, he said that the problem "involves a spiritual recrudescence and improvement of human character." But he went on to contend that the issues "must be resolved on the highest plane of *national* interest", and accordingly made four recommendations for a drastic revision of strategic planning with a view to the protection of America's defence line.

Tested by the canons of conscience, this would be wrong. The over-all problem now confronting all governments is, when will the 'survival interest' so long of necessity the paramount consideration for every nation, give place to conviction that, in the long run, external policy can only be safely based on moral principles.

Decision is likely to be expedited by general realization that war, in this age, is bound to ruin the victor as well as the vanquished. Possibly, the peace treaty with Japan, now

on the stocks, may provide a hopeful indication. It has been described as "without parallel in history". Mr. Dulles who drafted it, has said that "external pressures have put the free world on its mettle to do the right thing". This recalls the oft-quoted saying, that "to do the right thing is generally the right thing to do." But we have a long way to go before this is accepted as a universal maxim in the conduct of international relations. At the moment, we are anxiously awaiting the outcome of two other crucial controversies, concerning the Persian oilfields, and the Suez Canal.

The outlook for a revaluation of Christianity in the world's esteem depends chiefly on the three factors discussed above. There are many others, of course, which have to do with the structure of the Church, with the interpretation of dogma, and with the inter-relationship of sects and bodies of Christian worshippers.

But in our zeal to dethrone false gods, we need perpetually to remember that other religions than Christianity are custodians of spiritual treasure, and stand for freedom to obey God rather than man. Communism may be ascribable, in part, to reaction against catholic pretensions of an overgrown hierarchy.

All men pray. The soul of man, however humble he may be, is instinctively stirred to commune with his Creator, whether with dutiful intention and religious faith or unconsciously, in moments of wonder, joy, fear or sorrow. And prayer, according to its merit, is answered from the infinite source of all energy. Christians must not risk severing existing channels of piety in what used to be called 'heathen' lands, by ardent insistence on the superiority of their own fount of inspiration. By "Witness", and not by propaganda the Kingdom of God will prevail

That is why it would seem fruitless, at this moment of history, to endeavour to enrol all men under one banner of belief by calling upon them to give adherence to a Universal Creed or Prayer in simple and noble words so that all men could worship their Creator in unison and fellowship. The time is not yet ripe for this and perhaps it will not be ripe until the word is blazoned in the firmament. We have yet to bring about "Reunion" and heal division in our own Church and compose disagreements about dogma and ritual.

It would seem that truly philanthropic enterprise, (such as, for instance, the well-known "Medway Plan"<sup>2</sup> founded in

<sup>2</sup>The general purpose of the Medway Plan is the advancement of World Peace by giving material and moral support to all people without regard to race, color, nationality or religion, and to secure an understanding of the democratic way of life. It stresses that spiritual principles are the foundation of mutual understanding, brotherhood and peace.



America), offers the best means of uniting and consolidating religious aspirations and religious thought in the world.

We, who believe ourselves to be enlightened and civilized, no longer personalize the gods of our hopes and desires, and call them to a shadowy and brief life. But we set up demi-gods in our minds, and worship them if they seem to minister to our material needs and frailties. There, also, we must dethrone.