

Into the Great Silences

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What is the nature and place of worship in human life? That is the question that is in my mind this morning. The particular stimulus to the consideration of the theme comes from the remark made to me some few weeks ago by an evangelical minister who, in speaking of a religious service, said that he could not understand what people mean by worship, that he believed that the thing people desired in a religious service is entertainment; that the real worship is in daily work.

Now I must confess that I was somewhat surprised to hear such doctrine from such a source. The remark, however, set me to re-examining my own beliefs on the matter, and I wish to suggest some of them to you this morning.

Now I have to confess that this is a theme about which my thoughts and beliefs are so intimately associated with personal considerations that prejudice may be a factor in my conclusions.

But one of the first points that came to my mind is this: that this evangelical minister was unconsciously giving utterance to an opinion that is very widely held in our modern world. The remark is often made that people do not attend public worship because it does not mean anything to them. It is to them but a surviving (veriform appendix) of an age, which we are seeking to leave behind. It may be of value to some primitive minds, but as a vital and essential element it is in fact disappearing from life. The evangelical minister was saying just that, except that he was thinking of using the social customs of religious services as a medium of entertaining people. I do not believe that he really meant what he said. But he was saying what a great many are saying today.

Yet, in spite of this negative attitude towards worship, the institution of worship has obtained throughout all the ages of man that we know anything about. The primitive man and his primitive gods—demanding ceremonies. The most magnificent cathedral with its elaborate ritual; the private acts of the individual; the plain meeting house of the Friends and the Puritans; the shrines of nature—all of these bear witness to the widespread customs of worship in one form or another. There are two facts to deal with at the beginning. 1st the fact of questioning the value of worship. 2nd the fact of its prevailing habit.

What is the meaning of worship? Why has the institution developed? That takes us to the very heart of life right away. An answer depends upon our philosophy of life, on our conception of religion. There are four main answers.

1. Religion is a survival of the childhood of the race. Worship then is a make-believe game of childhood days. As we come to years of discretion and intelligence, we leave these childhood games behind us.
2. Second, while man is naturally devoid of religion, God has revealed religion to him, and established customs and institutions to go with this revelation.
3. Religion is implanted in the soul of man. God has made man with a religious nature.
4. Religion is a factor that arises in man the moment he becomes at all conscious of the world outside of himself, or begins to relate a present state of consciousness with the past or a possible future. In other words, any being that remembers or thinks or inquires about the world he lives in is functioning in terms of what we call religion. He is raising the questions of the relations and meanings of life.

This last idea about religion includes all that may be true in the former.

Let your imagination carry you back to the man of 40,000 years ago, living in a cave, developed sufficiently to make weapons from stone, to build a fire. You find his stone implements for the hunt and warfare. Simple, crude. But they had come into being as a result of his developing mechanical skill to aid in procuring his food and clothing,

and in protecting his family from enemies. For the same purpose exists our complex industrial life today. The forms of the tools have changed, their purpose is the same, to assist in sustaining life.

But will you still further imagine just what such a man might be thinking about as he stood at the entrance of his cave and watched the approaching dawn, or perchance a storm, or indeed the eclipse of the sun, or the majesty of night. What may have been his thoughts as he looked upon the dead of his tribe, or witnessed the prowess and courage of the strong? Does not all that we know of human life in ourselves, in history, tell us that his mind was filled with strange wonderings, and inquiries about the world just beyond his range of view, about the world from which came in such a mysterious way the storm, the sun and {???) the stranger from another tribe? Would not there come into his mind these curious questionings about his own family, the reason for the birth of a child, the mystery of death, the strange emotions of affection? Why some die? Why disease? Why death by violence? It's all of a piece with our own modern life problems? Why? What? Whence + Whither? The beginnings of religion = an attempt to know and understand the mystery of life, and to adjust ourselves to its demands.

40,000 years ago the untutored cave men felt these strange emotions and thoughts. Today, {???) ; {???) ; telescopes; microscopes; philosophies; religions! Our music our art! Yes the childhood of the race, but still we stand in awe before the mystery...

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... and customs. But never were we more deeply interested in the profounder meanings of life.

We have come to believe in two truths which all thought and science seems to point to.

1st that the world, the universe is at heart one.

2nd that we are like it, and capable of understanding it.

Upon this foundation rests the new interpretation of worship towards which we move.