

Confidence in the Amateur Thinker

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In the sermon that I preached last Sunday I said that the great need of the day is to take our problems out into the open, for free and open discussion among men as we find them. We need more democracy, not alone in politics, but in all the activities of life. I know that there are many who will tell us that democracy is a practical failure, and in order to escape from some of the embarrassing positions in which we are today, we must modify our democratic principles. We must put the management of our affairs into the hands of men trained in such lines of activity. That is a sagacious and far-reaching principle, but it must be accompanied with the supplementary proviso, that we must throw all of our problems into the open arena, to the end not only that we may become educated in the art of self-government, but quite as much, that we may have the opinion and the sagacious wisdom of the amateur thinker, the average man. Publicity is as necessary to politics and to intellectual life, as pure air is to bodily health. Democracy is founded on an abiding faith in the integrity of the amateur thinker. In these days, when there is a strong tendency to depend upon the personal or institutional trademark of the thoughts that we deal in, it is important to recall some of the striking incidents in history, where the ideas and the ideals of the amateur thinker have been pitted against the ideas and the ideals of the professional thinker, resulting in the clear vindication of the amateur by the logic of history. Out of a study of these incidents, I wish to point out the evident fact and principle upon which rests that confidence in men, the foundation of democracy, and fundamental hope for the development of the future.

At the close of the Sermon on the Mount there is a very interesting comment. "And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were astonished at his

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

teaching; for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes."<sup>2</sup> Note the situation. In the fullness of time, it is said, Jesus came. It was a time of great social unrest. The interaction of Jewish, Greek, and Roman ideals was bringing about a new civilization. The old was destined to oblivion. All that the old had accomplished was to be gleaned from the dross, and cast into the melting pot of new relationships to be remolded, and recast. The atmosphere was pregnant with new thoughts, new hopes. Into the midst of this unrest comes this strange amateur thinker, son of an unknown poor family from the despised town of Nazareth. The young man himself was a carpenter, not blessed with the education of the professional thinker, of the scribes, with whom he is contrasted. He came not with the trademark of the educated man of standing, or backed by a recognized institution, but with ideas and ideals. He went among all men. The scribes and the professionals, the trained regulators of society were displeased with his utterances, yet the common people, the fishers, the sinners, the outcasts, heard him gladly. To them he spoke as one having authority, but not as the scribes.

What is the reason for this hearing accorded to the amateur thinker and reader? Was it because he was presenting to the multitudes new and strange doctrines? Was it simply out of curiosity, and out of love for the new and the sensational that they listened? Not at all. They listened because he was preaching to them the ideas and the ideals that they already held sacred. In his close contact, and intimate relations with the people among whom he lived, he had gone beneath the surface of their lives, he had shared with them their hopes, he had drunk with them the spirit of unrest that characterized the times in which they lived. He knew their thoughts, their ideals, their aspirations. He had penetrated the very secrets of their minds, and when he came to speak to them of the great hopes and purposes that ravished his whole being, he was touching their own purposes and hopes, he was speaking from the lake-side, and roads and fields, so that all men could hear, the thoughts and ideals that they cherished in their hearts. He had become the spokesman of a great popular movement. He understood the multitude and the multitude understood him. To them he spoke with authority.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:28-29; for the Sermon on the Mount see Matthew 5-7.

This passage has been used largely for the purpose of demonstrating the greatness of Jesus' personality. I want you to turn it about the other way. History has demonstrated the effectiveness of his teaching. We have been told with nauseating repetition that he, and he alone, is the cause of the progress towards righteousness that has been made since that time. I want to pay a tribute to the un-named and forgotten multitude, of fishermen, workers and sinners, from whom, in large part, came his own ideals, and who responded to his teaching, because he expressed for them the ideals and the purposes that they cherished. The truth is that Jesus was the prophetic spokesman of a great moral and intellectual revolution. The ideas and the ideals which he taught were the ideas and the ideals of this growing nucleus of a new civilization. When they, the multitude, heard him speak, they saw in him their leader. The sheep knew the shepherd. If you think this situation over, you will see that it is quite as much to the credit of the moral and intellectual integrity of the fishermen, sinners, and others who made up the multitude, as it was to Jesus. History has vindicated the substantial integrity of their hopes. There was much dross in what they thought, to be sure, but in the midst of it, there was embedded the ideas and the ideals of a future civilization. This [is] a confirmation of faith in the powers of the amateur thinker, and the substantial integrity of popular thought.

I want to take one more illustration from early times. The prophecies of Amos, which in part have been preserved to us in the Bible, are the oldest historical documents of Jewish history. They belong to about the year 750 BCE. In presenting this illustration I draw from H.P. Smith's *Old Testament History*.<sup>3</sup> It occurs during the reign of Jeroboam II. It was in a period of great prosperity. The reign of Jeroboam was so brilliant that it has been spoken of as one that would usher in a new era. Everywhere was wealth, luxury, prosperity, and piety. At one of the great religious festivals, when the people were

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Preserved Smith (1847-1927) American biblical scholar. From 1897 to 1906 he was Professor of Biblical history and interpretation at Amherst College; in 1907 he became a professor at Meadville Theological School. His book, *Old Testament History*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909, first published in 1903 by the International Theological Library, is Earl Davis' source.

assembled at the sanctuary of Bethel, appeared Amos. He was not a literary man, though his book begins a new stage in the literature of Israel. He was a prophet, not one of the professed prophets, members of the guilds, but a man on fire with a message. A native of Judah, and a herdsman by occupation, he had felt the divine impulse, and left his herds and home to preach to Israel. Filled with the fire of his message, he came to the great festival, and declared to the assembled people that Yahweh, whom they were worshipping with sacrifice and song, was angry. The presiding priest saw treason in his utterances. Why should he not cringe before this denouncer of kings and priests and sacred ceremonies? The anger of Jehovah had been aroused, said the smiting Amos, because their outward prosperity had been appropriated by the leaders, and had not been allowed to reach the common people. The nobles and governors had no regard for their poorer brethren. Oppression and extortion were the order of the day. The wealthy landowners, in selling the necessities of life, exacted the utmost the traffic would bear. The middle men cheated both in the measure and the quality of the grain. The nobles sold justice to the highest bidder. And while the poor were thus ground down, the rich dissipated their lives in feasting. The feasting was, to be sure, carried on in the name of religion. But it was none the better for that. The altar, by whose side the upper classes drank themselves drunk, could exercise no purifying influence on such worshippers. The very garments on which the feasters lay witnessed against them, for they were garments of the poor, taken as pledges of usurious loans. The worship itself was infected, could drunkenness, gormandizing, fornication, constitute the service of Yahweh?

Such was the message of Amos to the people assembled in the great religious festival. He had his following too, not however, from among the professional thinkers, the priests and rulers, but from among the common people who also heard him gladly.

This strange unknown thinker and prophet, and those who saw in him their leader, began a new era in the history of Israel.

But to come yet a little nearer to our own time and interests, we find the same kind of a situation. We look back to the days of the Reformation, as the dawning of the modern world. We think of Luther, Calvin, and the other great leaders, who finally broke the bonds that bound themselves and society to the social order of the middle ages, but we forget the unrest and agitation

that had developed in the popular mind long before the leaders appeared, and organized it into an efficient protest. John Brown, author of *The Pilgrim Fathers of New England*, in speaking of the early ancestry of the movement which in turn, broke up feudalism, and brought to this country its first settlers, says

There may have been others, but looking back through the dim mists of time, the earliest pioneers of independent thought we come upon on English soil are thirty weavers in the diocese of Worcester, who were summoned before the Council of Oxford as far back as A.D. 1165. William of Newburgh, in Yorkshire, in that chronicle of his which he wrote at the request of Ernald the Abbott of the neighboring monastery of Rievaulx, tells us that when these people were under examination, they answered that they were Christians, and revered the teachings of the apostles. Inasmuch, however, as they made light of the sacraments and priestly power, they were condemned and scourged and branded as heretics, and then driven out of the city to perish in the winter cold; and thus says the chronicler, the pious firmness of this severity not only cleansed the realm of England from this pestilence which had now crept in, but also prevented it from creeping in again.<sup>4</sup>

All this was two or three hundred years before the Reformation. The point that I wish to make here is this. The Reformation was a great popular movement. From the time when these thirty weavers, poor obscure people, were condemned by the professional thinkers of the times until the day when the Reformation was accomplished, we can in our imagination see the gradual spread of the heresy for which the weavers were condemned, until at length there came a great leader who saw and felt the underlying current, and from all quarters came the responses to this appeal. Thus the Reformation. Thus all movements. Not only does the lower class support the upper class in the physical necessities, but it provides the thinking material for religious and social progress.

Still another example which comes very close to the needs and the spirit of our own times. The cooperative movement, which is less known here than in Europe, especially in England, had its

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<sup>4</sup> John Brown, *The Pilgrim Father of New England and their Puritan Successors*, London: The Religious Tract Society, Third Edition, 1906, p. 17.

beginning in the effort of 28 weavers in the north of England. They are called the Rochdale pioneers. They saved up a few shillings, bought a bag of flour, and distributed it among themselves at cost price. Then they organized into a society, each contributing a pound from their savings, and began to buy their household goods for themselves. This was in 1844. The movement spread like wildfire. Frederick Dennison Maurice, Charles Kingsley and J.M. Ludlow<sup>5</sup> took the movement up and pushed it. The statistics for 1905 show that there were 1,457 of these cooperative distributive societies in England, with a membership of 2,153,183, and making sales to the amount of 61,077,991 pounds or about \$300,000,000 dollars. Besides the movement has spread to most of the other countries in Europe. The principles involved in this great movement were grasped, and applied by the 28 weavers of Rochdale. Their sagacity and keenness gave birth to the practical application of a movement that is transforming society. This also grew out of the popular mind, and is witness to the reliability of the amateur thinker.

I have taken these illustrations, somewhat at random, but also because they present, not only the quality, but the breadth, of the thought of the average man, and show that he has contributed to the productive developing thought of the ages. Still more, I want to urge one or two considerations to which these facts point.

This is not the unexpected but the expected. Professional thinkers, those who think for a lifework, are confined and restrained by various conditions. They usually are identified with some institution. Any institution is bound to become conservative, unless careful watch is kept. The conservative atmosphere of the institution is reflected in the thought of the thinker that works within its limits.

Again the institution represents interests. Try as hard as we may, we are not always able to free ourselves from the limitations that these interests present. Amos placed no value upon the sanctuary, but the professional priest did. Then too, the very burden of knowledge in the professional thinker tends

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<sup>5</sup> John Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) was an Anglican theologian. Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) was a Anglican Priest, university professor and social reformer. John Malcolm Forbes Ludlow (1821-1911) was an Anglo-Indian barrister.

to retard him, and make his process slow. Again, he is inclined to be apart from the vital activities of human life. He does not come in contact with the pulsating life of humanity, his problem is the problem of books and thought forces. To the amateur, on the other hand, there is the much greater possibility of actual contact with life forces. He sees ideas and ideals, not in their book values, but in their human values, in the way they influence and effect human life. He is able to judge at a first-hand judgement.

This whole question is of practical and vital importance today. We must learn more and more to apply the principles [of] democracy. Free speech, free thought, were the watchwords of earlier days. They recognized the ability of men to judge the life values of ideas and ideals. They were not afraid to go into the open field and stake their opposing opinions, to win or lose at the hands of amateur thinkers. Above all else, we must learn to judge a thought or an ideal upon its own merits. We must not depend upon its backers, or its origin, but upon its quality and its purpose. The trademark of an idea as the guarantee of its worth and truth but carries us back to the middle ages, when society was ruled by an intellectual class, the priesthood. The worth and purpose mark an idea or an ideal in its effectiveness for human life, but carries [us] forward to the day of justice and righteousness, which Amos held out to the people of Judah as the end and aim of effort.

Religion is the ideal achieving effort of man reaching forward to the ideal achieving capacity of the universe. It does not, and never can, measure the idea or the ideal by its origin, or by the trademark that it bears, for in that moment it begins to die, and religion is the spiritual breathing of the human personality. Religion is the power in us that is forever pressing forward towards the ideal. Its motive power is purpose and its standard of measurement is human personality. It does and must have faith in the thought power of the average thinker, for in the thought and ideal of the average man occurs those variations.