

The Value and the Limitation of Allegiance to Religious Leaders

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The subject that I have in mind this morning is one that is closely related to the subject that we considered two weeks ago today, "The Use and Abuse of Bibles." Indeed, we might designate the theme of this morning, "The Use and Abuse of Christs." The way in which a movement of any kind, having its inception in the life of a great leader of men, at first responds to the touch of his moral dynamic, and at length crystalizes out into a hero-worship cult, devoid of all the original purpose that gave it significance, offers us food for serious reflection. No one who is at all acquainted with the history of moral and religious progress can fail to observe the fact that every great popular movement has developed its leader, in whom it finds a more or less adequate expression of its underlying purpose, has followed his directing influence, realized to a certain extent its initial purpose, and then slowly sunk to the level of a hero-worship cult, nourishing itself on the sentimental reflections of past glory, and allowing itself to become atrophied into a passive non-creative sort of an existence. An illuminating sort of an illustration of what I have in mind is afforded us by the spectacle of this past week, in the services commemorating the anniversary of the birth of Lincoln.<sup>2</sup> Sixty years ago Lincoln was just growing into the position where, as leader of a great moral awakening, he was directing the movements of the establishment of a new national ideal. At the time of this anniversary, when we are facing problems no less momentous than he faced, nothing has impressed me more than the tendency to convert these services into a sort of sentimental worship of a demigod. While we gain in the satisfaction of contemplating the heroic aspects of his life, yet we lose in over-emphasizing that side, and in over-looking the essential attitude that makes his life vital as a moral leader today. I think that we are all impressed with the fact of our own moral problems, and what is more, we are all

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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.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Lincoln was born February 12, 1809.

anxious to make our contribution to their solution. The contemplation of the life of Lincoln from the point of view of hero-worship, leaves us in the frame of mind such as the Jews habitually had, that frame of mind that is forever looking for the coming of a messiah. We feel our own incapacity, our own lack of training for the plain tasks to which our time calls us. The result is discouragement, and the inevitable looking for the coming of the God anointed Messiah. While just the opposite should be the effect. We should feel impressed, not with the sense of the vast chasm that separates us from the leader, but with the fact that adherence to simple human principles has enabled the leader to accomplish what he did, and that adherence to those same simple human principles that are in us as they were in him, will enable us to make, [if] not a great, but at least a worthy contribution to the work that is before us. We should feel the uplift, the call to the fulfillment of the function of life in all its various relationships. We want not the worship of the hero, but we want to receive something of the dynamic of his moral purpose, absorbed into our own being, and through us transformed, and transfigured into the living reality of our life work.

Herein is a thought that I wish to apply to the concrete problem of our relation to religious cults. How far should our allegiance to religious leaders be carried? All history bears witness to the fact, and indeed it is not pure assertion to say that every great movement in the direction of moral progress, or indeed any change, has always been associated with some great personality. Within the last 50 years we have witnessed the establishment of the doctrine of evolution. How closely that movement has been identified with Charles Darwin is apparent.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the mind of many, Evolution and Darwinism are synonymous, but one does not detract from the worth of Darwin to say that he is not wholly responsible for the discovery and the statement of that doctrine. We may class him as the leader, or rather a leader, of a great intellectual movement that has had its rise and has become established during the last hundred years. The name of Wesley is almost synonymous with the Methodist movement.<sup>4</sup> Cromwell stands for the active side, and

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin (1809-1882) English naturalist, author of *The Origin of Species*, 1859.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley (1703-1791), English theologian and evangelist and leader of a revival movement known as Methodism.

Milton for the intellectual side, of the great puritanism.<sup>5</sup> Calvinism, Lutheranism, each take their name from their leaders, as do the great monastic movements of the middle ages.<sup>6</sup> Mohamadism [sic] is forever wrapt up with the name of the leader,<sup>7</sup> as is Buddhism with the name of its leader.<sup>8</sup> So also do we find the same thing true in Christianity. But because we thus associate the name of the leader with a movement of this kind, we must be careful not to look upon the leader as the cause of the movement. That is far from being true. Indeed, it is almost entirely false. Much more true is it to say that the movement produced the leader, and even that is not true to fact. The fact seems to be that all these great movements, that make for a deeper appreciation of life and its relationships, have had their origin in unknown lives. They have involved a new, a growing, ideal. The increase and the spread of the movement has created an atmosphere. Then someone, feeling the pulse of the times in which he has lived, has come to the front, giving expression to the, as yet but half-understood and half-formulated, ideals, has become the leader, and the director of the movement. Thus it is established. The leader is not the cause, but he plays a conspicuous part, and is indeed a large and contributing force. Thus it was with the rise of Christianity. The interplay of national ideals had caused a modification and a fusion of existing forms and standards. Judaism was being modified by Grecian influences, and by Roman life. Out of the influence of the one upon the other, there must come changes. Jesus felt the pulse of this new universalizing process, he gave expression to it, and became the leader of its first great outward manifestation. He was not the cause, but the

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) active participant in the English civil wars, from 1653 to 1658 was the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland. He promoted moral reform and liberty of conscience. John Milton (1608-1674) English poet, author of *Paradise Lost* (1667). He actively campaigned against episcopacy in the service of Puritanism. He was a member of Cromwell's Council of State.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin (1509-1564) French theologian and founder of Calvinism, one of the early efforts of the Reformation. Martin Luther (1483-1546) German theologian and founder of Lutheranism, whose early criticisms of Roman Catholicism arguably launched the Reformation.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad (c. 570-632) Arab religious leader, founder of Islam.

<sup>8</sup> Buddha, common reference for Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563 BCE - 480 BCE) South Asian religious teacher and founder of Buddhism.

product of the movement, making his own large contribution to it. If we could get back into the atmosphere of the time in which he lived, we should come upon men, in whose minds there were strange wild thoughts, high ideals which ravished their very beings. Led by the hope of making these ideals vital to all men as they were to themselves, their realization became the absorbing passion of their lives. Do you imagine for one moment that the men who became the disciples of Jesus simply left their work to follow blindly the chance dreamer that came along and told them to follow him? Things do not happen that way. Back of it all is the setting of unrest, and longing idealism. He spoke to them as one having authority, not because he spoke of something new to them, but because he was speaking to them of, and clarifying for them, thoughts and ideals that were not foreign to them. The shepherd had come, and the sheep knew his voice. The disciples followed him, not because he asked them to, but because they recognized in him one to whom their own hopes and aspirations found expression. They followed his lead. It was not a servile obedience to a master who ruled by some alleged supernatural power, but the generous loyalty to one in whom they saw the embodiment of a common ideal and a common purpose. The influence of the dynamic of a great personality upon those who give their voluntary allegiance to its leadership is one of the inspiring things of human life. But in [the] interplay of personality, the gospel is one of give and take. We see the tremendous outpouring of personal influence from the mastermind, taking its grip and holding by a powerful hand of the spirit, and directing with the insight of sympathy, those minds that have given it voluntary loyalty. But we forget the constant inflow of inspiration and loyalty that comes to the mastermind from those in whom there is also hope, aspiration and loyalty. No Lincoln ever lived and wrought, but that he had behind him, not only to support and to assist, but to furnish inspiration and assurance, that great army of men and women to whom he was the incarnation of their hopes, their courage, their life. No Christ ever lived and wrought for the good of man, but that behind him, furnishing him with the daily food of his moral and intellectual life, that great background of men and women, like unto the leader in hope, like unto the leader in aspiration, like unto the leader in consecration, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood, soul of his soul. Perhaps the disciples and the followers of Jesus did not fully understand the full significance of his purpose, but anyway their loyalty and their hope is reflected in the loyalty and the hope that

appears in the life of him as their leader. Thus it always is in this great drama of human life. The virtue and the nobility of the leader are but the incarnation of the virtue and the nobility of those who, in whole-souled allegiance, give themselves to be led. Before them as the great guiding principle, the source of their common dynamic, is the vision, always the vision, of a new heaven and a new earth. Into one body are they molded by the discipline of purpose. Like a great army they follow their way, their leader before them, at once leading and being led. If perchance he should fall, there arises some Paul to take the words of command as from his very mouth as he falls, and still the great army moves forward with an irresistible force, irresistible because it is charged with the dynamic of human life and human progress. Let leader after leader fall, the progress can no more be stayed than can the progress of the stars in their course. It is all part of the great cosmic process, the fulfillment of the very function of being. Such is the relation of leaders and followers.

I now pass to the specific question of the relation, or rather the proper significance, of the person of Christ to the religious life of our own time. Once, with a spontaneous enthusiasm, men rallied around the leadership of Christ, recognizing in him the embodiment, and the effective agent of their idealism. That love, that devotion, that response of the common people, who heard him gladly, is a tribute not only to him who was listened to, but to those who listened. Since that day when he spoke to the multitude with authority, great abuses have arisen in the cult that have attempted to honor him and to continue of that fellowship that had its spontaneous uprising in the fullness of time. The spirit has been forgotten. A cult of hero-worshippers, not entirely devoid of a sickly sentimentalism, have usurped the place of those who accorded him, in the early days, their spontaneous loyalty. To them, among whom he moved, he was the beloved leader. To their followers, he became the supernatural agent of God. As days passed by and hero-worship took the place of honest loyalty, more and more he became removed from the life of men, becoming in turn a demigod, and then very God himself, until at last, like the disciples of old, they knew only that he had been taken from them, but they did not know where he was laid. Such [is] the situation today in the great body of the Christian church. We still accept the name that is connected with Jesus, many still pay him a formal worship as to a God, or a hero, but the

vital influence of him as a help in common everyday human life is gone. All this is the natural result of the long-continued effort of lifting him up above the common level of life, so that men looking upon him have become discouraged, and could see there only the supernatural being, the latchet of whose shoes they were unworthy to unloose, who had in him some strange power that made an impassable chasm between him and the common life of man. For the sake of a great lifeless useless demigod, they have destroyed one of the grandest human souls that ever responded to the glorious impulse to human life, and that ever held himself true to a noble ideal. Thus we have not only limited, but in a large measure, destroyed, the true influence that the founder of Christendom should exercise over the life of man. It may have been necessary at one time to do this, but certainly it is no longer necessary. Let us cut away the abuses of allegiance, and if we may feel the true human pulse that was in the life of Jesus and those who heard him gladly, that new impulse to life that has marked an era in the history of mankind.

Insofar as man rises above the commonplace animal existence, he does so in response to an irrepressible impulse to realize a truer, grandeur view of life than he has yet lived. Before him is the vision of truth unknown, of goodness not yet realized, of beauty as yet undreamt of. To feel the deeper undercurrent of this great pulsating humanity, to swim valiantly in the great current of human progress, to feel the call of the finite to its universal consecration, and to fulfill, joyously, in pain and in pleasure, the great function of human life—that is life.

In that life, we have wisdom, inspiration, uplift, vision, even consecration itself, from those among whom we live, from those who have lived, in many ages and climes. Wherever we get that help, whether in the man who lives today, or in the man who lived hundreds of years ago, it is a help not because the person who gives was removed from us by some great unhuman power, but because he is akin to us and has touched the simple true chords of the symphony of human life. Those who have lived, received and they gave. It is for us to receive and to give. We owe no man or person any homage above that of the respect and the love of one man to another in the giving and the taking of the moral and spiritual helps of human life. Whatever there is in the life of Jesus that gives courage, insight, uplift, that helps to make life nobler, and the world better, let us take it, and be thankful that he and many another has lived true to simple

principles of human life. But we must not forget that we, too, are human beings destined to fulfill the functions of human life as were they, and that they can demand naught of us that in anyway impoverishes the full exercise of the powers of human life that are within us. In our relationship to uplifting personalities, we are to be guided by the same principle as in the relationship to sacred writings. Those writings that inspire us, are inspired, and we take from them as we need. Those personalities that inspire and uplift us, they are for us Christs, our anointed ones. In the high thoughts that they inspire in us, in the nobility of purpose with which they infuse us, in the personal integrity that they exact of us, is the true and righteous expression of our deeper appreciation for the lives that they have lived. In the handiwork of our craft is our prayer.