

Two Great Principles of the Modern World

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From the decay and disintegration of the ancient and medieval order of society, there is slowly and steadily developing that which we call the modern world. It is the child of the ancient, but a child that shows marked and clear-cut differences that have alienated it from the mother that gave it birth, and in whose midst, as a strange child of genius, it has grown thus far on its way to maturity. Two of these distinguishing characteristics I wish to speak of this morning, for they seem to me to be very important to those who are attempting to grow up in this modern world, and are anxious to see it advance to a healthy and well-regulated maturity. Further, I speak of these principles this morning for they are a sort of a father confessor, or rather a standard of measure by which we may determine whether or not we are in true accord with the cause that we would espouse. Many there are, who would be zealous promoters of the ideals of the modern world, but whose influence goes all in the direction of maintaining the old and decaying debris simply because they become confused in their principles, and put their energies into maintaining the old, when at heart they really wish to devote themselves to building the new. Still more, the intensity of the times is fast making it impossible for us to work half of the day in rebuilding the crumbling, and the other half in upbuilding the new. We must decide whom we will serve, the God of the living or the God of the dead, the God of antiquity, or the God of modernity. The boasted days of a broad toleration are disappearing. Lines are being drawn, and we are being asked on which side of the lines we stand. Therefore, I wish to present, with as much clearness as possible, the two great principles in the faith of the modern man. Then let us ask ourselves whether we are striving to serve one God or two, whether we are playing a straight, fair open game, or are we hedging, playing now on one side and now on the other. The hedger is taboo. We cannot serve two gods.

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

The first of these two principles is faith in the substantial integrity of the universe. It may seem foolish to raise that question, but as a matter of fact I find mighty few who really have an abiding faith in the integrity of the universe. Somehow they cannot free themselves from that old notion that in making the world there was some kind of a slip made with the result that the world and all things therein are undesirable. That life is undesirable, and the only thing for men to do is to plod along solemnly and piously through this vale of tears, waiting patiently for the lifeline of death to save them from the mud and scum of things, and take them away from the world of evil into the world of good. If, by chance, such people happen to have a good time for a few moments, and the smile of satisfaction appears on their face, they begin to shake with fear, lest having some pleasure in life, they may forfeit the happiness of death. There is still sense in that line of Omar, "Take the cash and let the credit go, nor hear the roar of the distant drum."²

The type of person who believes that somehow this world is a fraud and a delusion, a cheerless cell, lined with thongs, varies in the intensity of his convictions. We find him high up in the mountains, dwelling in some cave apart from the world and from men, praying to God for salvation, struggling against the flesh, hoping that somehow, amid the general smash-up of things, he may escape destruction. If he feels his body calling for food, he starves himself, if he feels happy, he tortures himself; everything that is natural and pleasant is of the devil, and must be crushed, and put to one side.

Or again, we find him going along the streets, his nose in the air, fearing to come in contact with the common herd lest he lose his standing in the little heaven of mud-huts that he and his cronies have built. We find him everywhere among those who say, "I thank God that I am not as other men are." To him the world is all wrong, except himself, God and a few others. Everywhere is sin, everywhere is that which is not to be

² Omar Khayyám (1048-1131) was a Persian polymath, mathematician, philosopher, astronomer, physician, poet. This is part of a stanza from his poem, "The Rubaiyat" in *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1859, p. 3.

trusted, everywhere [is] the evidences of the great cosmic blunder which took place when some fool God tried to make the ideal a living reality.

All this distrust in the integrity of the world, in the substantial reliability of experiences, is part and parcel of the old world ideal, which, with all the might and vigor of conviction, we should try to forget. Upon it, as a foundation, rests the ancient doctrines of depravity of man, the ideals of class rule, and the notion that religion is some kind of supernatural vaccination, which will prevent those upon whom the vaccine acts favorably, from suffering the disease of sin, and assuring them immunity from eternal damnation.

On the other hand, the modern man has a substantial kind of faith in the world as it is. He thinks that we can depend upon it. To be sure, he realizes that there is enough variation and uncertainty from his limited finite point of view to make life interesting. But when he plants his crops in the spring, he feels comparatively sure that, if he takes proper care of them, he will get a harvest. When he goes into his laboratory, he is backed by the faith that there is in the universe an ordered system, sufficiently trustworthy for him to investigate. He relies upon the validity of the truths that he discovers. If things do not work out as he expected or suit his notions, he does not berate the universe, or declare that the thing is made wrong. He continues his work confident that if he seeks, he will find, and if he knocks, the door of truth will be opened unto him.

When the modern man goes about among men, he does not hold his nose in the air, condemning man for his depravity, and withdrawing from contact. In spite of the fact [that] the conditions in the laboratory of human life do not come up to his notions, he keeps on working, confident [that] if he seeks in all honesty, he will find the truth, confident that the appalling conditions are not the evidence of a blunder, but the evidence of immaturity, and that as humanity goes on honestly seeking for the truth that shall make men free, it shall find the truth. Faith in the substantial integrity of the universe means above all else, a faith in the substantial integrity of men, and the possibilities of human life.

As the man in whom the modern spirit is keen faces the world, he never questions the substantial integrity of its orderliness. Whatever is unexplained, is not due to a blunder, but to incompleteness, either in the evolution of the world, or in the fragmentary nature of his own wisdom. He feels the swing of the world process, and he feels himself a thinking, animated contributing factor in its development. The universe, or the world, is not an evil from which he should escape into salvation, but the place, the opportunity for life, for growth, for achievement, the eternal sea of glorious exhilaration in whose restless waters of human life is the richness and depth of eternal values.

Have you faith in the substantial integrity and reliability of the world, and life, in the substantial integrity of mankind, not in the few, whom you know, but in the unnumbered millions, in the great rack and file of humanity, have you faith there? If so, you belong to the modern world, with all its daring idealism, with all its glorious hopes, with all its righteous purposes, with its faith in man, and its love for, and faith in, the eternal worth of human life and human living. If so, you believe in freedom.

If the first article in the faith of a modern man may be described as faith in the integrity of the universe, faith that the common as well as the exceptional experiences of human life are realities, and not shams and deceiving delusions, then the second article of faith may be spoken of as that of growth. It would seem strange that this idea should be questioned. Yet every notion of a ready-made revelation of truth, of a ready-made form of government, of a ready-made example of human perfection, is a denial of this principle of growth. Everyone who attempts to hold back the growth and development of humanity, everyone who rests upon the basis of formal authority, either in religion or government, in thought or in action, denies this great fundamental principle of modern life.

It is only because men fail to have faith in the principle of growth, or development, in the universe, in man, and in human life, that they think that the world is one great blunder. If we can stand wherever we happen to be, and look back over the past, and compare conditions of life today with the general conditions one hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, ten-thousand years ago, we shall see that the passage of

time, and the making of history, has been something more than a mere cycle of events. Seeds, powers, capacities of men for life and living, have sprung from the fertile soil of human possibility. Old powers have taken on new forms, have left behind them crudities and barbarities that would shock even the most barbarous mind of today. In all the powers and the capacities, in all the functions and activities of human life and living, the passage of time has been the witness of growth, of evolution from the imperfect to the less imperfect, if not to the more perfect. History is not the treadmill in which some God keeps us working to no purpose. The universe is filled with thought possibilities, as the Leyden jar is charged with electricity. The thought possibilities are discharging themselves in the events of history. In the long run, change in life, and in human affairs, is in the direction of progress. Purpose of some kind is inherent in human life, and if human life, and its highest aspirations, are the finite registrations of eternal principles, then this progress is in the direction of realizing some purpose, some purpose that we may call the universal purpose, that towards which all creation, gods, angels, archangels, as well as living human beings tend. The world is not complete. Only the dead thing is finished, and humanity is not dead.

I know that there are many that will tell us that all this progress is but a mere delusion. But I think that such a remark is but superficial. We feel ourselves under the pressure of a tremendous social unrest today. We are told that it is due to the fact that [the] conditions of life are much harder than they were years ago. That is true. The average man has a much harder fight for it in the struggle for existence than he did a few years ago. If we take the short-range comparison, we must feel that the passage of time is bringing not progress, but regress. But there are other elements to be considered. The unrest of our times is witness to the conviction in the minds of men, not that life and living is worse than it has been through the ages of history, not that we have left a garden of Eden behind us, and are slowly but persistently walking away from it, but that life today, however better it may be than it has been in the past, is by no means satisfactory. In a broad way the discontent of today is witness to a big moral growth and uplift in the life of man, and is a pledge for the unceasing progress of the future towards justice and righteousness in human life. The unrest of today is

not the cry of pain so much as it is the proclamation of ethical and moral idealism.

This is the second article in the faith of the modern man, growth, development, progress, in truth, in the power to appreciate beauty, and in goodness and righteousness. The moral vigor of our time is consecrating itself to the work that grows out of the conviction that human life is not entirely what it ought to be.

Are you modern, or do you belong to the ancient or medieval world, with its priest-ridden, nobility-ridden past? Are you standing pat, for things as they are, or are you pressing with all the vigor of life for the things that should, and must and shall be? Is the garden of Eden behind you or before you?

The lines are being drawn, we have to choose. Do we belong to the modern world, with its faith in the integrity of the universe, in freedom, and honor among men? Or do we belong with the old, who hope to escape from the catastrophe of a blundering creation?

Do we believe in growth, in progress, that amid the conditions under which we live, we still cherish conviction for the morrow? Or do we belong to the dead past, whose only effort is to build a life boat, on which a few may escape to some isolated heaven of piety or money, god knows which is worse?

To bring these ideas down to a clear ending, let me quote a passage from Professor James:

A conception of the world rises in you somehow, no matter how. Is it true or not? you ask.

It *might* be true somewhere, you say, for it is not self-contradictory.

It *may* be true, you continue, even here and now.

It is *fit* to be true, it would be *well if it were true*, it *ought* to be true, you presently feel.

It *must* be true, something persuasive in you whispers next; and then—as a final result—

It shall be *held for true*, you decide, it *shall be* as if true for *you*.

And your acting thus may in certain special cases be a means of making it securely true in the end.³

Have you faith and hope? In faith and hope shall we do our work. In faith in life and in growth.

³ William James (1842-1910) American psychologist and philosopher, co-founder of American pragmatism. This quote is from his book, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909, pp. 328-9.