

The Undercurrent of the Times

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

April 29, 1917¹

In the early chapters of the prophet Zechariah there is a series of visions which are interpreted to the prophet as symbolizing the shattering of nations, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the coming of a Golden Age. The central theme of this ecstatic vision is in the phrase, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord."² This is the theme of the prophetic utterances of all ages. Amos sounds it with absoluteness of a dictator; Isaiah tells the tale of it with the insight of a seer, and Micah's phrase, "Let justice roll down as water, and righteousness as a mighty stream"³ has become a stock phrase. But not alone in Israel, but among all nations and all religions, in all times down to our very own, there has been this same note, now expressed in the form of pious exhortation, and yet again sounded in the word of the zealot, and not infrequently in the sayings of the statesman, the reformer and the philosopher. This same contrast I wish to set before you in two very pungent passages from Professor Foster's great book, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*.⁴ He is contrasting the various orthodoxies, not merely the religious, but the political

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #6"—that is labeled "Sermons During the War." While there is no explicit date on this sermon, evidence in the text itself places it on Sunday April 29, 1917. The text references the recent entry of the United States into World War I (April 4, 1917) and the start of the Russian Revolution (March 8, 1917) the next Tuesday, May Day, May 1, 1917 (see page 5). Hence, Sunday April 29, 1917.

² Zechariah 4:6.

³ Davis writes, "Micah's phrase," but the passage is from Amos 5:24.

⁴ George Burman Foster (1858-1918) theologian and faculty member of the (Baptist) Divinity School at the University of Chicago. Davis wrote a sermon specifically focused on his book, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, see <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/the-finality-of-the-christian-religion-1906/>.

and social as well. In these orthodoxies in whatever form the characteristics are the same.

Primacy of the intellect in man; the ascetic-contemplative life, the highest life; knowledge the chief good; dogma or "sound doctrine" the essence of Christianity and the content of revelation, such content guaranteed by infallibility of pope or book, whose credentials are necessarily miraculous; saving faith, first of all holding things to be true because pope or books says so, the finality of the Christian religion consisting in the miraculously authenticated divinity of its doctrines—this is all of a piece and it all fits into the old Graeco-Roman and medieval world, with its static cosmology, and its static Empire, and hierarchy over the spirit.⁵

Such, to Professor Foster, is the nature of all orthodoxies, the product of, and expressing the fundamental principle of, authority characteristics of the Graeco-Roman, the medieval, and all authority institutions, not only ancient but their lineal descendants of the modern world.

Contrast with that world view his exposition of the modern world, whose principles seek establishment in the present.

The primacy of the will in man; the practical moral life the highest life; character the chief good; ideals the essence of the Christian religion and the content of revelation, which latter is the history of great souls and the soul of history; ideals valued teleologically and not causally; faith not assent, but moral action; the finality of the Christian religion in its ideals—this, too, is all of a piece and fits into the modern dynamic and biological world.⁶

This is the nature of the modern world that has been struggling for centuries, four at least, to break its way through that old absolutist world of hierarchies and empires, that was running full swing in the Graeco-Roman and the medieval world. It is the basis of the conflict that is going on in your soul and mine today, that is going on in Europe, and also in America—in church, in state, in politics and in industry.

⁵ George Burman Foster, 1906, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 189.

⁶ George Burman Foster, 1906, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 189.

Let me quote just one more passage from the same writer, a passage in which he sets forth the same contrast in a little different language.

That I am inwardly bound only by my reason and my conscience, and not by any authority out of me, this is not only the *Magna Charta* of Protestantism, but the form of that inner ethical disposition which it was the mission and merit of Jesus to organize and consummate. The deliberate repudiation of self-dependence and self-accountability, the voluntary surrender to an infallible external authority, blind obedience in matters of faith and conscience—in a word, the foregoing principle, of the use of my reason and my conscience—this is tantamount to the denial of the omnipresence of God, who is Living Love and Wisdom, in the life of humanity. And to say this is entirely consistent with the conviction, which we should gratefully cherish, that all men begin their development with childlike adhesion to authorities and models, and that these have great humane and pedagogic importance. But the doctrine of static infallibility, on the one hand, with its correlate of permanent human nonage on the other, is immoral; and the recognition of this doctrine is no better, since its recognition is the annihilation of one's spiritual self. Consequently, not the scientific interest simply, but the religious and moral most of all, have demolished the principle of absolutism, of Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy, and a further development of religion is the order of the day. Demolished, did I say? The tree seems full-fruited. *Zeitgeist* is a mighty support. Force, not ideals is god, and force tends to absolutism. Absolutism in business, which is mammonism; in government, which is militarism—this repression of individuality, this faith in force and unfaith in ideals, is an expression in another form of the orthodoxies which build on some sort of institutional infallibility; and the former reinforce the latter. There is an attraction and fascination on the part of each for the other. Thus, the outlook for absolutism seems favorable. ...

Nevertheless, I do not believe in the triumph of any of these absolutisms. The victory is not with the strong, not with force, but with ideals.⁷

Such, then, is the contrast. Absolutism, mammonism, militarism, authority, obedience, surrender to force, force is master. All this, on the one hand, and ideals, the power of will, purpose, freedom and life on the other. Such is Professor Foster's exposition. Such is the statement of the same principle in Zachariah, and Jesus made this distinction the basis of his break with the times in which he lived. "Ye cannot serve two masters. Ye cannot worship God and Mammon."⁸

Now I have not brought these academic quotations before you for simply an academic reason, but for the very practical reason that all this contrast that I have set forth is involved in the very heart of these most searching times. I want to set forth this fundamental principle and contrast, for in the proper appreciation of this, and in the unflinching application of this principle to the small and the big problems of today, is to be found your worth and my worth, either in throwing back human society into the absolutism from which we have been struggling to free ourselves for at least the four hundred years since the protestant reformation and the first hard blow at feudalism, or in more firmly establishing the principles of freedom and loyalty to truth which we cherish.

Nor is this problem so easy as at first thought appears. "No man liveth unto himself, and no man dieth unto himself."⁹ This nation was founded under those principles of modernism which I have set forth. The *Declaration of Independence* was the expression of the will to establish a government here for the free development of human life. Even the keen remark made while the signers of the *Declaration of Independence* were standing around committing an act that would have cost them their lives had they failed in their undertaking, expresses the essence and character of the ideal of government that was in their minds: "If we do not hang together, we will hang separately" is at once a bon mot and the statement of a very deep and far-reaching

⁷ George Burman Foster, 1906, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 197-198.

⁸ Matthew 6:24.

⁹ Romans 14:7.

principle. They were committing themselves to a voluntary act, and they were to hang together in the purpose that they had willed. Today those principles upon which that nation was founded, and the nation founded upon them are involved in a gigantic struggle, more terrible than the world has ever seen. But the issues are not clear. They never are clearcut. For the moment we are not concerned with the origins of the war, more than to state that it grew out of the conflict of Empires, of rival survivals of the Graeco-Roman, and medieval world. In both of these survivals there were elements of the new world at work, working with increasing strength and power. These surviving elements, relying upon force and authority, instead of purpose and truth, started the conflict. In the course of time, we have been brought into it, and this is the great fact that we are trying to adjust ourselves to. It is no longer a question [of] whether we believe in war or not. It is a fact that we have to face and will have to face with greater appreciation of its reality within a very short time. We may not believe in earthquakes, but we have to face them when they come. This is the tremendous fact that is involved in the personal attitude towards the war. If we support it simply because the government says that we must, and not because we can will to support it, we are committing what seems to me to be a treasonable violation of the spirit, the purpose, the genius of the government. If we argue ourselves into support by a lot of sophistry, we accomplish the same results. On the other hand, merely to object to the war and refuse to support it on the ground of some dogma that we have enthroned in our minds is, equally to deny the principles of freedom, and the best tradition of the government. We have to face the thing as it is, with all its complications and its implications, it's horrible possibilities. It is a momentous issue, fraught with more possibilities for good and for evil than we can dream of. In so far as we believe in those principles, of "not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord,"¹⁰ in those principles of the modern world that I have spoken of, those principles upon which this government was founded, our only interest is in them, and in the institutions that embody them, to some degree at least.

The war was begun as a commercial, imperialistic conflict. It is going to end in revolution. I am not deceived with the idea that the British Imperialistic government with its Tory

¹⁰ Zechariah 4:6.

personnel is fighting for revolution, but the trend of events is too strong for them. The undercurrent of liberalism is breaking through in spite of every effort of absolutism to hold it in check. The Russian Revolution marks the turning point of the war. It is possible that on Tuesday, May Day, the break will come. If not at that time, then later. That is the one certain thing that is resulting from this war. It is the last colossal folly of absolutism, whether in state or in industry. In part it was started to forestall the inevitable victory of democracy over its crumbling strength. But it willed more than it knew. Of this, at any rate, I am convinced that nothing now can stop the swelling tide of the undercurrent of the modern spirit, as it sweeps through the ruins of the industrial feudalistic absolutism. The spirit, the idealism set free from the prisons of Siberia will not stop until it has swept Europe.

It has been said again and again that this is a war to make democracy safe, so far as this nation is concerned. Whether that was the purpose in the minds of those who first advocated involving this nation in the war, I am not only very doubtful, but very certain that it was not. But the turn of events in Europe, and the solemn conviction of many here that such is the motive of this country, has committed this country to that motive so completely that this conviction is slowly spreading through the country, and taking a deep root. That slogan may prove a great asset to those in this country who are interested in the principles of democracy. It will prove powerful in settling the terms of peace. It is creating a public opinion that cannot be resisted. So, as I see it, while the war lords started the armies in motion, the liberals, those of democratic tendencies, not to say socialists, radicals and pacifists are to have a very great share in determining the issues, and settling the terms, and binding up the wounds of the nations. The undercurrent of the times, the history of the modern world so declares. The terror and the burden of the war has put every militarist in the world on the defensive. So far as European conditions are concerned I believe that the balance of the forces indicates that the entrance of this nation into the war is really to the advantage of international democracy.

I mean by this phrase not only political democracy, but industrial democracy. For whatever else has been the result of this war, it has been a burning into the people of the nations, and the nations in their international arrangements, that the

principle of cooperation, so long the symbol of heresy, has become the great achievement in all the nations. Professor Steinmetz¹¹ spoke wisely when he said that whatever may be the military outcome of the war, the principle of cooperation has become established, and the old fetish of competition has been overthrown. We shall see in the next few months great strides made in that same direction in this country. Even the voluntary attempts at cooperation that have been started here now are meeting with a response that is fairly astonishing. It is constructive and instructive, and based, not upon sentiment and doctrine, [but] upon a real economic necessity. The possible result of facing a real situation with our eyes open to its dangers, and our minds alert, and our heads clear, will be [a] welding together of a real democratic nation, democratic in industry as in social relations.

So that is the situation as I see it. We are in this war, a war begun as a conflict between surviving empires of medievalism but destined to end in a revolution that will bespeak the assertion of the great undercurrent of democracy that has been struggling for establishment in the modern world.

So, it is our task to see to it that, so far as this nation is represented in the conflicts of Europe, it shall have the backing, as we are able, of that purpose of a war to make democracy safe. Not one inch of conquest, either in territory or in profits. What this nation puts in shall be a contribution to the principles of democracy. No revenge, no conquest, no wiping out of nations. That such an attitude is carried out, and democracy is made safe in part as a result of our efforts, will depend upon the public opinion that obtains at home.

But that public opinion at home is a serious matter. There are elements in this country that have been working, and are working, against these very principles of democracy that the country stands for, and that are at stake in this war. They will take every advantage possible of the stress of this time to

¹¹ Charles Proteus Steinmetz (1865-1923) German-American mathematician and electrical engineer best known for his work developing alternating current. Steinmetz also was a vocal socialist. He emigrated to the United States in 1889 and was a faculty member in Electrical Engineering at Union College from 1902 until his death in 1923.

fasten upon us principles of absolutism and strengthen those principles of authoritative compulsion that are already too strongly established. Already the attempt has been made under the cover of military necessity of suppressing free speech and making free thought a thing of reproach. All this is directly antagonistic to that democracy whose interests are at stake. There is a small militaristic clique in this country that, for various reasons, is pressing its propaganda. Industrialism will seek to strengthen itself, and there will be the almost inevitable gang of profiteers who will seek to make blood money out of foreign and domestic necessities. Then there is the momentous possibility that we shall become so absorbed in small things that we shall have permitted absolutism to have gained a greater control at home than is safe. All this means that we must be continually on the alert to protect the interests of democracy at home, and to prepare for the greater assertion of them, in a stronger and democratic nation after peace shall have come. In this task, as great as any task that is before us, we must keep our heads clear so that we may not mistake molehills for mountains, and our personal and passing opinions for big principles and fundamental issues. We must take every advantage to further the practical adoption of real cooperative effort, and real democratic principle. The enemies of democracy are mammonism in business; militarism in politics; blind faith in religion; subservience to dogma in all things. The friends to democracy are cooperation in business, cooperation in politics, fellowship in religion. These are the great issues before us. The truth shall make us free.

One thing more. The prayer of Jesus of Nazareth contains this phrase that is a real prayer today. "Give us this day our daily bread."¹² Around this prayer by every effort that we can make, let us weld ourselves into a great democracy. War is destructive, but even here, in this question of daily bread, we may find the holy grail and the broken crust that shall bring a new light into this world now so sore distressed by its leprous disease of war. Here is a real, pressing situation where we may work for production only, and send forth the slogan of "No profits in a war for democracy." Finally, when the war is over, it would be a great thing to be able to pour food and nourishment as evidences of goodwill into the homes of those people of the central powers, who now in the language of

¹² Matthew 6:11.

international law are our enemies, not to sell to them, but to give to them for the joy of the giving, for the hope that it will bring to them, and for the new world that it will help to create.

I know that this is a sad theme. I am not going to bring it before you again, but I had to do it this morning that I might find my way through to a stronger, a clearer light than I have seen for a long time. Is it too much to hope that out of this horrible tragedy of lust for power and wealth, there may not rise from the ruins of crumbling empires, and falling monarchies, a new world, better, more just, cleaner? "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord." May it not be that in the trial and the strain that is before us in this nation there shall be born in us a purified democracy, based upon a real freedom, and a real cooperation? In part, the answer to that wish rests with us. The great undercurrent of the times moves in that direction. Shall we give as we are able to the end that together men may live, and that nations shall know war no more, neither servitude, nor misery.