

Our Secularized Civilization

by Reinhold Niebuhr

One of the foremost philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr was for many years a Professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. He is the author of many classics in their field, including The Nature and Destiny of Man, Moral Man and Immoral Society, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, and Discerning the Signs of Our Times. He was also the founding editor of the publication *Christianity and Crisis*. Niebuhr warned in 1926 against ecclesiastical and cultural shortcomings which a generation later were to be widely and ruefully acknowledged. This article was published in the *Christian Century*, April 22, 1926. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation, used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This article was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

Unqualified optimism on the present state or future prospect of religion in modern civilization can emanate only from a very superficial analysis of modern life. In America such optimism is justified by the undeniable prestige of the church in the popular mind and the vitality of the institutions of religion. In Europe optimism is not even supported by these facts. Yet America is in many respects more pagan than Europe, which means that the vitality of the institutions of religion is not in itself a proof of authentic religious life. The fact is that we are living in a completely secularized civilization which has lost the art of bringing its dominant motives under any kind of moral control.

Recent events in Europe reveal what unrepentant tribalists Western people are and how little they have learned from the great tragedy. They seem to lack both the imagination to realize the folly of their ways and the humility to conceive of their folly as sin. While we in America affect to pity Europe, the sense of moral superiority, which is always the root of pity, is based on illusion. We are no more moral than Europe, but our tremendous wealth and our comparative geographic isolation save us from suffering any immediate consequences of our moral follies. However active the institutions of religion may be in our national life, there is no trace of ethical motive in our national conduct. To the world we appear, what we really are, a fabulously wealthy nation, intent upon producing more wealth and seemingly oblivious to the consequences which unrestrained lust of power and lust of gain must inevitably have on both personal morality and international harmony.

The fact is that the social life of the Western world is almost completely outside of ethical control. A political leader of Gandhi's type would be unthinkable in the Western world. While it may be true that all groups are naturally predatory and have never been effectually restrained by moral scruples, yet there is a measure of indifference to and defiance of moral law in our modern world which compares unfavorably with the best in either our own or oriental history. The fact is that we are living in a completely secularized civilization.

The secularization of modern civilization is partly due to our inability to adjust the ethical and spiritual interests of mankind to the rapid advance of the physical sciences. However much optimists may insist that science cannot ultimately destroy religion, the fact remains that the general tendency of scientific discovery has been to weaken not only religious but ethical values. Humanism as well as religion has been engulfed in the naturalism of our day. Our obsession with the physical sciences and with the physical world has enthroned the brute and blind forces of nature, and we follow the God of the earthquake and the fire rather than the God of the still small voice. The morals of the man in the street, who may not be able to catch the full implications of pure science, are corrupted by the ethical consequences of the civilization which applied science has built. While pure science enthroned nature in the imagination, applied science armed nature in fact.

It is a part of the moral obfuscation of our day to imagine that we have conquered nature when in reality applied science has done little more than debase one part of humanity to become purely physical instruments of secular purpose and to cause the other part to be obsessed with pride in the physical instruments of life. The physical sciences armed nature -- the nature in us -- and lured us into a state where physical comfort is confused with true happiness and tempted us to indulge our lust for power at the expense of our desire for spiritual peace. We imagine we can escape life's moral problems merely because machines have enlarged our bodies, sublimated our physical forces and given us a sense of mastery. The mastery of nature is vainly believed to be an adequate substitute for self-mastery. So a generation of men is being bred who in their youth subsist on physical thrills, in their maturity glory in physical power and in their old age desire nothing more than physical comfort.

Vaguely conscious of the moral inadequacy of such an existence, men try to sublimate it by restraining their individual lusts in favor of the community in which they live. Thus nationalism becomes the dominant religion of the day and individual lusts are restrained only to issue in group lusts more grievous and more destructive than those of individuals. Nationalism is simply one of the effective ways in which the modern man escapes life's ethical problems. Delegating his vices to larger and larger groups, he imagines himself virtuous; the larger the group the more difficult it is to fix moral responsibility for unethical action.

It would have been too much to expect of religion that it find an immediate antidote for the naturalism and secularism which the modern scientific world view has created. It was inevitable that the natural world, neglected for centuries, should take vengeance upon the human spirit by making itself an obsession of the human mind. But it cannot be said that religion has been particularly wise in the strategy it developed in opposition to naturalism. Religion tried to save itself by the simple expedient of insisting that evolution was not mechanistic but creative, by discovering God in the evolutionary process. Insofar as this means that there is room for freedom and purpose in the evolutionary process, no quarrel is possible with the defenders of the faith. But there is, after all, little freedom or purpose in the evolutionary process -- in short, little morality; so that if we can find God only as he is revealed in nature we have no moral God.

It would be foolish to claim that the defense of a morally adequate theism in the modern world is an easy task; but it is not an impossible one. Yet most modernists have evaded it. Modernism on the whole has taken refuge in various kinds of pantheism, and pantheism is always destructive of moral values. To identify God with automatic processes is to destroy the God of conscience; the God of the real is never the God of the ideal. One of the vainest delusions to which religionists give themselves is to suppose that religion is inevitably a support of morality. There are both supramoral and submoral factors in religion. Professor Santayana makes the discrimination between two instincts in religion, the instinct of piety and the instinct of spirituality, the one seeking to hallow the necessary limitations of life and the other seeking to overcome them. Pantheism inevitably strengthens those forces in religion which tend to sanctify the real rather than to inspire the ideal.

That is why modernism, which has sloughed off many of religion's antimoral tendencies but has involved itself in philosophic monism and religious pantheism more grievously than orthodoxy ever did, has been so slight a moral gain for mankind. Liberal religion is symbolizing a totality of facts under the term God which orthodoxy, with a truer moral instinct, could comprehend under no less than two terms, God and the devil. It would be better to defy nature's immoralities in the name of a robust humanism than to take the path which most modern religion has chosen and play truant to the distinctive needs of the human spirit by reading humanity into the essentially inhuman processes of nature. There is little to choose between the despair to which pure naturalism tempts us when we survey the human scene and the easy optimism which most modern religion encourages. What we need is both the spirit of repentance and the spirit of hope, which can be inspired only by a theism which knows how to discover sin by subjecting man to absolute standards and how to save him from despair by its trust in absolute values.

The secularization of modern life is partly due to the advance of science, but also to the moral inadequacies of Protestantism. If liberal Protestantism is too pantheistic, traditional Protestantism is too quietistic to meet the moral problems of a socially complex age. Protestantism, as Professor Whitehead in his *Science and the Modern World* has with rare insight pointed out, has no understanding of the social forces and factors which impinge on and condition human personality. It believes that righteousness can be created in a vacuum. It produces no sense of tension between the soul and its environment. The conversions of which it boasts may create moral purpose, but that moral purpose is applied to a very limited field of motives where application is more or less automatic. It helps men to master those sins which are easily discovered because they represent divergence from accepted moral customs: the sins of dishonesty, sexual incontinence and intemperance.

No religion is more effective than Protestantism against the major social sins of our day, economic greed and race hatred. In a recent trial of Negroes, growing out of a race riot in one of our metropolitan centers, the defense lawyer shrewdly manipulated the selection of the jury so that there would be at least a minority of Jews and Catholics in the jury box, and it is reported that their votes were for the defense when the jury failed to reach a decision. No real progress can be made against the secularization of modern life until

Protestantism overcomes its pride and complacency and realizes that it has itself connived with the secularists. By giving men a sense of moral victory because they have mastered one or two lusts, while their lust for power and their lust for gain remain undisciplined, it is simply aggravating those lusts which are the primary perils of modern civilization.

Protestantism reacted against the dualism in Roman Catholic ethics which produces asceticism on the one hand and an easy-going connivance with human weakness on the other. It is true that there is a dualism in Roman Catholic ethics, which can develop, let us say, a Cardinal O'Connell on the one hand and a Cardinal Mercier on the other. But Protestantism has a dualism equally grievous, which produces a Cardinal O'Connell and a Cardinal Mercier in the same skin, a pagan and a puritan in one person, whose puritanism becomes an effective anodyne for a conscience not altogether easy in the sins of paganism. If a choice is to be made between monastic and quietistic ethics, surely monastic ethics must be termed the most Christian, for it is better that the world shall be feared than that it be embraced with a good conscience.

How a fretful anxiety about a number of lustful temptations can develop a perfect complacency in regard to other temptations may be seen by the fact that the church is not now so conscious of some of the sins of modern civilization as some of our most thoroughgoing, realists. If Scott Nearing had the ear of New York he could convict it of sin more surely than Bishop Manning can. The *Nation* prompts its readers to a consciousness of social sin more effectively than does, say, the *Watchman-Examiner*. It is significant, too, that the very part of the country in which the churches insist upon "regenerate membership" and recruit such a membership by persistent revivals is most grievously corrupted by the sin of race hatred. Protestantism -- and insofar as Roman Catholicism has departed from the best medievalism, Catholicism, too -- has no understanding of the complex factors of environment out of which personality emerges. It is always "saving" individuals, but not saving them from the greed and the hatred into which they are tempted by the society in which they live. Protestantism, it might be said, does not seem to know that the soul lives in a body, and that the body is part of a world in which the laws of the jungle still prevail.

Perhaps it might not be irrelevant to add that its failure to understand the relation between the physical and the spiritual not only tempts Protestantism to create righteousness in a vacuum but to develop piety without adequate symbol. That is why the church services of extreme Protestant sects tend to become secularized once the first naive spontaneity departs from their religious life. In Europe nonconformist Protestants tend more and more to embrace the once despised beauty of symbol and dignity of form in order to save worship from dullness and futility. In America nonconformist Protestantism, with less cultural background, tries to avert dullness by vulgar theatricality. The Quakers alone escape this fate because their exclusion of symbol is so rigorous that silence itself becomes symbol. If worship is to serve man's ethical as well as religious needs, it must give him a sense of humble submission to the absolute. Humility is lacking in Protestant worship as it is missing in Protestant civilization. If this humility is medievalism, we cannot save civilization without medievalism.