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Modernism and Fundamentalism in Religion, 1924.

"MODERNISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM IN RELIGION."

RABBI ABBA HILIEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

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A conflict is raging today within the most orthodox of the Protestant churches, which, to my mind, holds meaning and significance not alone to the communicants of that church, but to all religiously minded men and women. This conflict has already cut across sects and creeds; it has already passed beyond the denominational line of this one particular church. And I believe that it holds significance, too, for the Jew, because the struggle, while ostensibly one touching certain dogmas of the Christian Church, is in reality the age old struggle between the future and the past, between liberalism and orthodoxy, between spiritual freedom and ecclesiastical authority.

This conflict has been erroneously called the conflict between modernism and fundamentalism. The very phrase suggests a certain bias which is not justified. The true modernist is a fundamentalist; the true fundamentalist is a modernist. The struggle in reality is **not** between those who deny the fundamentals of faith and seek innovations, and between those who cling to the fundamentals of faith; the struggle is rather between those who cling to a certain theology against those who would **advance** with advancing religious thought. In other words, it is a struggle between religion and theology.

In the Episcopal Church it has, for the time being, taken on the form of a declaration on the part of some

few courageous, outstanding ministers maintaining that they have the right to interpret certain articles of the Apostolic creed of that church less literally and more spiritually, more in conformity with the increased knowledge of the day, maintaining, even, that they have a right to challenge and deny some of the articles of this creed without being untrue to the informing spirit or to the progressive tradition of that particular church, and without being compelled to resign from leadership within the church.

✓ Less than a year ago Reverend Grant questioned, in rather ambiguous and uncertain terms, but questioned, nevertheless, the literal interpretation of the divinity of Jesus; whereupon he was publicly rebuked by the bishop of his diocese; and that flurry had not yet subsided when another minister, angered by an imputation contained in one of the letters to the members of the diocese that one who does not interpret the Apostolic creed literally is more or less of a hypocrite,--this minister, dramatically enough, in his pulpit divested himself of his ecclesiastical raiments, and in the garb of a doctor of theology announced that he, for one, questioned many of the basic dogmas of his church, especially that of the Virgin birth, and of the resurrection, and yet he insists that he can, in all sincerity, and in keeping with the tradition of his church, remain as minister and leader of his flock.

A certain minister of this same church in Texas has been threatened with a heresy trial, and the

✓ battle lines are being drawn between those co-called fundamentalists or orthodox, and the so-called modernists or liberals. Of course to the observer of religious progress this struggle was well nigh inevitable. Every form of orthodoxy has been challenged in our day--political orthodoxy, economic orthodoxy, social orthodoxy, scientific orthodoxy. Why, then, was one justified in hoping that religious orthodoxy would remain unchallenged?

Orthodox has come upon evil days. Ever since the colossal defeat in the sixteenth century Christian orthodoxy has fought a desperate but a losing battle. For it is in the very nature of every form of orthodoxy that it can win every battle but the last one. The last battle it can never win.

In the closing days of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century, this modernist movement, the call of the future, the cry of the human soul for freedom, the insistent demand on the part of men to adjust their religious faith to the growing scientific truth about them, found expression in the Roman Catholic Church, under the leadership of Quazzi and Dereal and many another courageous thinker. Modernism invaded this stronghold of intrenched orthodoxy. It was met, of course, with denunciation. The panic stricken Pius X hurled encyclical after encyclical against these heretics, but without avail.

It is very interesting to note the means which this guardian of orthodox Christianity suggests as the means

of stemming the rising tide of progress in his particular religious fold. In his encyclical letter in 1906--this is not the Middle Ages concerning which we speak now; this is our own day--in 1906 the pope writes to his bishops and his followers warning them against this growing heresy within the church, and advising them that the bishops exercise the most scrupulous vigilance over the masters and their doctrines, recalling to their duty those who may run after dangerous novelties,"and relentlessly removing from office all teachers and all those who do not profit by the admonitions they have received." Relentlessly removing from office all those who are addicted to dangerous novelties.

"Let not young clerics be permitted to frequent the public universities, except for very weighty reasons and with the greatest precautions on the part of the bishop. Let the pupils in the seminaries be entirely prevented from taking any part whatsoever in external agitations, and to this end we forbid them to read newspapers and periodicals, with the exception of some one periodical of sound principles which the bishop may judge convenient to be studied by the pupils. Let the disciplinary arrangements be maintained with ever greater vigor and vigilance."

Relentlessly removing from office, and forbidding men to read and to study. That is one way that institutional religion has adopted to meet this challenge of the new day, and never with much success. And now it has invaded the Catholic Episcopal Church, the most orthodox

of Protestant denominations, and the panic stricken old men in authority are endeavoring to resort to the same methods which the church has resorted to for centuries without avail--force, suppression, ex-communication. If any man dare to depart from the rigid line circumscribing the thought of the fold, let him be expelled and driven from the communion of the faithful.

In olden days, when civil government was under the control of religious authority, heresy was punished with exile or with death at the stake. Now, when the church has fallen upon evil times and can no longer use the arm of civil government to enforce its decrees, it can use the last agency of suppression--ex-communication and religious exile.

I am rather inclined to think that these defenders of the old order and the old creeds serve their church and their creed and their cause but little when they resort to these means. When a gifted man is driven from communion the church becomes impoverished by so much. The intellectual assets of that denomination are impoverished because of the expulsion of this gifted man; for, as a rule, the rebel, the liberal, the dissenter is a thinker or a dreamer, and the church needs his mind and his soul. And then again, if creeds are let alone they take care of themselves. It is a mistake, especially in this day, to make an issue of a creed. A creed, if let alone, takes care of itself; if it is made an issue, it often destroys itself.

I have seen in England and on the Continent

many very old homes, homes which were built three and four hundred years ago, which men have made habitable by introducing some modern improvements within the shell and the frame of the old house. They have retained the charm of the old, the memories of the old house, and yet have gained the convenience and the comfort of the new day. No one has lost by the process. The past has retained its creation, the present has introduced its new note and its new contribution, and the dweller within that old home has both the past and the present with him. Why should a man say, "You must take this old house with all its dilapidation, with all the unpleasant accretions of the ages, and you must do nothing to make it habitable."

If I may suggest, that is equally true of creeds and dogmas. If let alone, the progressive religious thought of the world, while retaining the outward form and shell of the creed and the dogma as a survival and as a reminder of the past, of the genius of the past, of the experience of the past, while retaining the line of continuity with the past, will yet, through reinterpretation and reevaluation, introduce within this dogma the new note, and the past will be served, and the present will be served, and the future will be safeguarded. So that those who say "take it as it is or leave it," are the enemies of the cause which they believe they are serving.

And it appears to me, too, that the individual dissenter must be and should be the only man to determine

✓ whether, dissenting as he is from the orthodox tradition and standard, he may conscientiously and honorably remain within the fold of the church. If the man be credited with sincerity he must be the only man to decide between him and his maker. Whether he can consistently, without doing violence to his soul and his spirit, continue in office, whether he believes that his church is so pliable and flexible, and the tradition of his church so malleable and so susceptible to change that he can, in spite of his "dangerous novelties" still remain within his fold, no external authority dare presume to decide a matter of this character for an individual man.

Most reformations have come about from within, not from without, and if the church is a living organism, the urge to live and to expand and grow must inevitably come from within, and the church has hurt itself to the quick if it were for all time to suppress this inner urge for expansion and change which alone saves an organism from extinction.

Now, what would happen if these rebels, the Parks and the Grants and the ~~Law~~rences and the Heatons are expelled from the church? Would that be an evidence that others the next day or the next year or the next decade would not resume the struggle in the self same way? Does the expulsion of a proponent of an idea signify that the idea has been permanently discarded or crushed? And if a reign of religious terrorism would force all these timid souls within the

denomination to submit patiently to the new cause and dictum authority, would that mean that the soul of the church has been saved? Is that the type of leadership that any denomination needs? And if the ministers within that denomination are so timid and craven that they would submit to external authority and abide by external uniformity, where there is no internal essential harmony and unity, a real spiritual unity can be effected only by voluntary and enthusiastic endorsement of certain convictions and principles which people have made their own willingly.--I say, even if the ministers within the church, more anxious to serve their own interests rather than the interests of God and of man, would yield, how long would the laymen within that church be content to follow men who are not following the gleam that never was on land or sea, men who are not consecrated to an ideal, for which they are ready to sacrifice when the occasion arises.--I say, how long would laymen, intelligent laymen of the twentieth century, be content to follow such men and to remain within the walls of such a church? How long will laymen be satisfied to arrange their minds into two compartments, the one for religion and the other for science and investigation and the scientific method, and the intelligent outlook upon life, the critical point of view, without any inter-communication between these two chambers of their minds? How long will this mental dichotomy, this break, endure?

The saddest thing about this controversy, to

my mind, is this: that those who have precipitated it are unaware of the real problems of religion today. They are altogether blind to the tremendous, real difficulties which concern all religious institutions in the twentieth century. They do not know just what is going on in the minds and in the souls of thinking men and women. They really think that men and women today are tremendously concerned with the problem of whether the Bible is fallible or infallible, whether the pope is fallible or infallible, whether the resurrection mentioned in the Old and the New Testaments is actual fact or not. They are really under the impression that men are very vitally concerned and terribly perplexed about the problem of the Virgin birth. They do not know that men have gone far beyond these questions. They have been relegated to the world of the past. More insistent, more perplexing, more fundamental problems are troubling the minds and souls of men and women today.

If these men who instigated these controversies were really fundamentalists, they would be prayerfully and passionately concerning themselves today with the one and only fundamental thing in religious life--the one reality, the one thing concerning which there is neither time nor space: the soul of man seeking God. That is the one and only reality in the whole complex of religious life--the soul of man seeking amidst the confusion, the flux, the uncertainties, the tragedies, the incomprehensible facts of life,-- seeking the unity of some steadfast purpose, seeking to find

some intelligence, some wisdom, some goodness within this welter of confusion and sorrow; the soul of man seeking to find itself, to place itself, to adjust itself with all its scattered efforts and all its besetting doubts,--to attune itself to some essential, all-pervading harmony; the soul of man struggling to discover the major theme for man's symphony.

That is the struggle of mankind today. Men want to know whether God is, and how man may know Him. Men want to know whether life is worth living, whether struggle has a meaning, and moral exertion has a justification in the intelligence of a constructed universe. Men want to know whether life is only a blind, stupid, meaningless, futile cycle of change, so that one should live as the animal, only more so, or whether there is an ascending perfection in the scheme of things, of which scheme of things man is an essential part and an essential channel for this progressive evolution.

Men want to have these doubts resolved, these questions answered, as the basic facts of life. Now, in the Middle Ages and long ago it was a comparatively simple thing to answer these questions. Here was an infallible book, here was an infallible church, here was an infallible tradition, here was a perfect revelation, here was a complete program, attested, proved by saints. All your questions are answered here. Accept them. And men did accept them. There was absolute truth, final and binding for all time.

That is orthodoxy. But today man cannot be answered in this simple way, because man no longer accepts authority as implicitly and submissively as that. The scientific methods which the last two centuries have developed have taught men to question premises and to examine proofs and to verify conclusions. The theories of evolution and the theories of relativity which have developed in the last few generations have taught men to suspect any absolute and to question any pretension to finality and perfection. And so this book, and this church, and this program, and this revelation must appeal to the mind and to the soul of man not on the basis of authority or an historic fact, but on the basis of their message and value to the man himself, and how far these institutions can help him to solve these problems which are troubling him.

It is not at all surprising that the orthodox are fighting so vehemently the theory of evolution today; it is not at all accidental that they are endeavoring to introduce legislation into our state governments which would prohibit the teaching of evolution; it is not at all an isolated fact that their most gifted men are travelling throughout the length and breadth of this land damning those who teach evolution and advocating the expulsion--mind you, expulsion, again--advocating the expulsion of those teachers and those professors in universities who dare to teach this method or theory of evolution; because this method and this theory undermines all the props--all of them--of

every possible orthodox.

If you once grant, as you must because of the overwhelming evidence and data and proof, that progressive life, that life changing and adjusting, is a fact, in biology, in geology, in sociology, in every department of life, then you cannot very consistently and for very long maintain that this same method does not also apply to the spiritual life of man about his religious thought. If life changes as needs arise, as new conditions arise, then surely the spiritual life of man changes similarly; and if that is true, then any postulate of a perfect revelation in some distant past is, on the face of it, unreal and impossible; then the past is the child of the future and not the parent of the future; then the past knew less than the future will know; then the past was only a period of transition, a link in a long, endless chain of spiritual continuity, of spiritual revelation; then revelation is not an historic fact but a spiritual process which continues today as it did in the past, and which will, we hope, augment in volume, in decumancy, in content, in the centuries to come.

If evolution is real--and by evolution I have more principally in mind not so much the mechanistic conception of evolution but the idealistic conception, that of creative evolution,--if evolution is a fact in life, then no book, however sublime, however precious, however full of the most valuable gems of human thought and spiritual values, then no book created by the developing mind and soul of man

can be infallible and perfect, and in every detail binding upon all eternity. If evolution is a fact, then no church, however worthy, however great its tradition, however great its services in the present, and no ritual, however time-honored, has permanent and abiding validity.

An institution, like species, lives and can live only as it adjusts itself continuously to the changing environment about it, and when it can no longer do so it must go the way of the myriads of species which have ceased to be because they were orthodox, because they could not create within them tools with which to wrestle against changed environments.

The struggle within the Episcopal Church, the struggle within all churches, the struggle within Judaism, revolves around this one fundamental thought. Do not for a moment imagine that Judaism is free for all time from the possibility of such theologic controversies. Reformed Judaism is the outgrowth of such a controversy a hundred years ago in Germany, and modern orthodoxy will yet face this same conflict. It must. Judaism, fortunately, is not tied, not shackled so irrevocably by dogmas as other churches are. Judaism shackled conduct more than it shackled thought. Even orthodoxy, Talmudic orthodox, left leeway for each successive age to introduce its particular point of view. Along with the written law--the Bible--it set up an oral law, the oral tradition, equally binding, equally real, which meant that every age may, without doing violence to the spirit of the

Bible, develop new ideas and new laws and new institutions to meet the new conditions of the day. Even the Bible, the letter of the law, was subjected to thirty-two or more methods of interpretation, so that very often through these methods of interpretation a new law was evoked, because it was early realized that life has a stronger claim than a book, that life is autonomous, and that the spirit of man is a law unto itself; that the primal and supreme fact of life is not a book, not a tradition, not a church, not an historical fact, but the primary thing is theon-rushing, horizon-sweeping, world-exploring, ceaselessly-aspiring soul of man.

True religion, my friends,--and this is my last thought this morning--has nothing to fear from the modernist, and everything to fear from the fundamentalist. If the fundamentalist will have his way, religion will soon be relegated to the realm of astrology, and witchcraft, and alchemy. The outlived and antiquated pseudo-sciences will hold the minds of thinking men and women enthralled for thousands, for thousands of years.

The past has nothing to fear from the modernist, but everything to fear from the fundamentalist. That which was worthy in the past, the modernist, the liberal, the progressive, the religionist will treasure for the future. There can be no future without a past. That which is worthy and useful in any book, in any tradition, in any church, that which still has meaning and efficacy and import for life today, the progressive religionist will preserve,

augment, intensify, purify and transmit to future generations. Fundamentalism is a break with a past, because it dams and dikes the past; modernism is a continuous thing, because it is co-terminus with life itself.

We shall continue to go to the Bible for that which the Bible expressed in the most perfect, conceivable terms. We shall not go to the Bible for our knowledge about biology, or physics, or chemistry. We shall not go to our Bible to understand creation. The church cannot compete with the scientific laboratory concerning things physical. The church cannot and does not serve the cause of religion by insisting that natural physical laws have at some time been violated by some miracle workers. We shall go to the Bible, and the church, and the tradition, the synagogue, to learn about those things which these contain and express in the highest terms concerning the spiritual laws of the natural world. We shall go to the Bible not to discover tricks perpetrated on nature--miracles, exotic, queer things, novelties, which can only entertain an infant; we shall go to the Bible for its profound ethical message, for its supreme spiritual melody; we shall go to the Bible when our hearts ache for communion with God; we shall go to that book into which the creative minds of our people have poured the excellencies, the supreme excellencies of a supreme race,-- we shall go there to listen to the words of wisdom of patriot, prophet, priest and sage; we shall go there to hear the passionate cry of the prophets summoning men to justice

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and to righteousness and to love. We shall go there to hear the calm, often plaintive, always intriguing voice of the Psalmist, whispering mystic messages of superb communion with the ineffable one--of faith, of piety, of adoration, of religious exaltation. We shall go to the Bible to see what those wise old men of the great past thought about the problem of good and evil, about the problem of righteousness unrewarded in this world, and wickedness apparently prospering; we shall go to them to see what was their dream about international justice and international peace. We shall go to the Bible for its code of holiness, for its commandments, for its ethical guidance and leadership. And we need not seek to find in it anything more than that, for that is the all-important.

The church would do well, and so would the synagogue, if we would think less of things, of facts, of creeds and dogmas and books, and authority and institution, of ecclesiasticism, of ritual, and more of that spirit which informed the past and informs the present, and will inform the future; of that yearning and longing of the human soul for divine intimacy, which found expression in the past, which struggles for expression in the present, which will continue to as long as the human race lives upon this revolving earth into the future.

The church, the synagogue, would do well, it would regain its place of leadership in the world which it has so tragically lost, it would help to save our Western

civilization from utter ruin and collapse, such as well nigh overtook it within the last decade, it would help men lost in the mazes, in the labyrinthian darkneses of this life, it would help to help find themselves and to establish proper relationships among themselves, if it would stress in this day and age not an old creed concocted by old men sixteen hundred years ago, whose knowledge about life, the scientific world, the physical world, was almost negligible, but if it would stress the prophetic note of all religion--the doing of justice, and the loving of mercy, and the walking of humbly with God, character and conduct--character and conduct in God, under God, in the spirit of God, for the glory of God,--the doing justice and the loving mercy, ethical conduct, and the walking humbly with God, an emotional exaltation which brings us nearer until we touch the very hem of God's robe of glory,--that is the mission and that is the opportunity of the church today. Not to drive men from its ranks who are trying to free themselves from the chains which the dead hand of the past has placed upon them; not expelling men who are craving for joy and freedom so that they can work in joy because they will work in freedom.

The task and the opportunity of the church is to lead in love, in kindness, through inspiration, men on the road which leads to Bethel--to the House of God.

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