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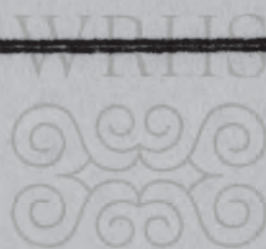
What can a modern man believe?, 1925.

"WHAT CAN A MODERN MAN BELIEVE?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

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In our discussion of the subject, "What Can a Modern Man Believe," it is of interest to observe at the outset that man from the very dawn of his rational life was curious about the universe in which he found himself. He persistently tried to understand it. Man from earliest times was not content merely with observing the physical world about him; he was not content with the knowledge of which his five senses apprised him; he attempted in all ages to get, as it were, into the very heart of things, to understand the whole plan and purpose of the universe.

I use the word "curious," and yet it was not idle curiosity which prompted man in these speculations. It was a need, a desperate necessity of his life--the kind of a need which the mariner experiences on the high sea, the need of a compass and a chart, in order to escape shipwreck. Man found himself in this flux of life amidst these turbulent movements of the universe--the revolving seasons, day and night, stars and planets, growth and decay, life and death, joy and sorrow--caught up, as it were in a veritable vortex of being, change, movement; and he had to understand the plan and purpose of it all in order to specialize his own life, in order to guide himself intelligently through his world. Hence science, which is man's effort to understand the nature and the function of phenomena; hence philosophy and religion, which are man's efforts to understand the meaning and the purpose back of these physical phenomena. And science and religion

are not therefore two distinct and contradictory efforts of the human mind; they are one--one road which bifurcates only to meet again, one effort embracing the two sides of the one problem.

So great was man's need for a comprehensive grasp of the universe that he went in every age far beyond the knowable and the ascertainable and constructed systems of thought, without waiting upon the actual data which life could give him. He could not wait. Where he did not know he postulated; where he could not discover the facts quickly enough he projected a wish that ^{the} facts might be so. In other words, upon the apex of ~~the~~ few known facts he built an inverted pyramid of systems of thought because his life demanded that sort of thing. He abandoned all the successive systems of thought as his knowledge increased and new truth became known to him. But the building of inverted pyramids is continuing to this day. Man today, in science and philosophy and religion is postulating where he cannot know, and is projecting wish-worlds to live in.

Now this groping way to truth is at once an evidence of man's humanity and of man's divinity. It is a confession, in the first place, of man's finiteness and of the incompleteness of his knowledge. He knows little; and at the same time it is an index to something very akin to divinity in him--the aspirations to know more and to be more. It is this quality to know more and to be more which distinguishes man from the beast and makes man just a little

lower than the angels, as the Psalmist would express it. What we know is very meager, and relative to our inadequate agencies of cognition, and predetermined by the organization of our brain. What we know is meager; what we are likely to know will probably also be small in comparison with that which can be known. But what we wish to know, what we aspire to know, what we sweated and agonized to know,--that is the divineness, that is the limitless, that is the crown and the heraldry of human life.

Our unrealizable dreams are endless quests. The goodness which we can perform is small, limited by our human abilities. The justice which we can establish, the truth which we can make manifest, the beauty which we can express,--these things are little because of the innate deficiencies of our lives. But they are small only in realization; in execution they are bigger; but in our desires they are infinite; in our passionate desires, our cravings, our longings, we overleap the physical barriers of our life and we rise to the very heights of the infinite. It is in these aspirations of man that he finds his contact with Divinity, his access to God.

So that when we speak of a man's beliefs we are approaching the highest levels of his life, the climax of his being, and we ought not, therefore, to speak of a man's beliefs apologetically, as though they were a confession of weakness. We should not, of course, lend ourselves to that popular notion entertained by the half learned--that the

scientist knows that the ignorant man believes. The scientist does not know. The scientist does not know a fraction of a fraction of the knowable facts of the universe, and the man who is accounted ignorant may, in his instinctive groping, in his intuitions, touch something which is profoundly true. The greatest scientists of the human race have never claimed that they have found the answers to the problems of human life or of existence; the greatest scientists have never claimed to have discovered the solutions to the problems which have perturbed and perplexed the mind of man since the beginning of his rational life--the problem of the one and the many, of being and of becoming; the problem of creation and the problem of the origin of life, the problem of the origin of consciousness. The great scientists have never claimed to have plumbed the very depths of human personality and the human will. They have observed phenomena, they have studied the world about them, they have collected data, they have organized and classified, they have discovered certain rules which seemingly are constant and which we call the laws of nature. But back of these phenomena the source, the purpose, the end,--that no scientist has laid bare.

It is only those who interpret subjectively the findings of the scientist, it is only those who build pyramids upon the apex of the scientific facts discovered who are sometimes tempted to generalize and say science proves that the world is a blind mechanism and that man, like the beast, is a mechanical automaton, and that there is no spirit

ruling and controlling the world. But no scientist worthy of the name has ever made such unwarranted, scientifically unwarranted assertions. There is nothing in the accumulated knowledge of science which compels a modern man to surrender his beliefs--nothing. He may have to surrender some of his beliefs which are not essential beliefs. There are certain beliefs which really have nothing to do with the nature of religion but which are simply the antiquated scientific notions of the past which a modern man in deference to the newly discovered truth must surrender, and should by right surrender. Notions such as the creation of the world in six days, the creation of man out of dust and of woman out of the rib of man, and notions about a physical heaven and a physical hell above the earth and below the earth; the notion of physical resurrection; the notions of literal inspiration and infallibility of a book, or the actual divinity of a man; the notion of miracles and omens, and all these pseudo-scientific notions of ancient man,--these things a modern man must surrender, should surrender.

The fundamentalist who does not surrender these things is not, on that account, more a religionist; he is simply less a scientist. The fundamentalist prefers the science of the Semites and the characters of three thousand years ago to the science of the twentieth century; he prefers the kindergarten stage to the research laboratory of the human university. That's all. The modern man in surrendering these beliefs surrenders nothing which is vital to his life

and to his spiritual development. On the contrary, he gains much in abandonment, for in place of these shadowy, confusing superstitions of yesterday, science today gives him luminous, enlightening truth; it gives him faith in a universe of order and symmetry and balance and of a scheme of things upheld by unswerving and steadfast law; it gives him a racial history which is a myriadfold more dramatic and more sublime than the racial history of the Book of Genesis; and it gives him a travel path in life of truth-finding and truth-seeking. But as far as the essentials of faith are concerned, science, far from undermining them, is ~~coming~~^{beginning} to establish them.

What are the essentials of faith? I would say that there are three root-beliefs from which many others branch out. I would say that they are, first, belief in God; secondly, belief that man is morally kin with God; thirdly, belief in freedom, free will. The Jewish philosopher-theologian of the fifteenth century, Joseph Albo, reduced the whole of Judaism to just such three principles. He calls them by a different name. He says the three root-principles of Judaism are belief in God, revelation and retribution. Now revelation is nothing more but this kinship with divinity, and retribution has no meaning unless man has free will. So that the principles are essentially the same.

Science has not dethroned God. On the contrary, science is beginning to find the indispensibility of a creative intelligence in the universe. The universe is

either rational or it is not. If it is not rational then it is folly to try to discover in it laws constant, operative at all times,--laws which imply rationality and which therefore imply a rational mind. The universe is either the result of accident or the result of plan. If it is the result of accident, then how can we account for the order, the balance, the symmetry, the discipline, the organization, the constancy which are evidenced in ten thousand forms all about us, ten thousand expressions all about us?

What is accident? The very idea of accident implies a preordained plan from which the accident is a departure. If the universe is built according to plan, then there must be a planner--someone who planned it. If the world is organized upon, as it were, the blue-prints, following definite laws which the scientist seemed to discover, then these blue-prints are the creation, must be, of some Master Architect who conceived it all.

There have been those who have tried to explain everything in the world on the basis of matter and energy. We call them the materialists. The mind is but another form of matter; life is but another manifestation of matter. And yet we ask: what is matter? And they will tell you that matter may be reduced to certain primal particles--the electron. And what are electrons? Energy. And what is energy but another name for something which is unknown but real, something real but indefinable. Again, how do we pass from matter, as the materialist conceives it, to mind? How

do we pass from senseless matter and blind energy to consciousness and life? How can a thing which has neither personality nor will nor memory create that which has personality and will and memory? Is it not more reasonable, even on the basis of scientific reasoning, to postulate that the whole of the universe is mind and spirit and that all which exists, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, are forms and expressions, each after its kind, of that all-pervading mind, which is God? ✓

Science has not dethroned divinity. It seems that the hypothesis of a creative intelligence is the only hypothesis which is likely to account for the facts of existence. That is the first thing a modern man can believe in--in God; in an all-powerful and all-good Intelligence out of which all things are formed, into which all things return; an Intelligence which touches and directs and controls the universe.

And the second faith of a modern man which he need not surrender, should not surrender, is the faith that man is in relation to this universal mind; that man is kin; that man shares part of that mind, part of that intellect. Divinity flows into the life of man as a great river flows into a narrow channel--confined, limited, but the waters are still of the vast, endless reaches beyond. And man touches divinity through his mind-efforts and his soul-efforts. ✓
Through the highest reachings of his being man touches divinity.

And the third faith of the modern man is the faith that man is free. Man is not clay worked upon by external forces and conditions. Man is not passive; man is an artist; man is a creator; man, in a sense, is a fashioner of his own destiny. To deny this is to deny the reality of human progress and of civilization in general. The forces of the world are the self-same forces which surrounded man ten thousand years ago, fifty thousand years ago; and fifty thousand years ago man was a brute in the jungle, and today he is a Shakespeare and a Darwin and a Newton and a Beethoven. Man was not content to be worked upon by the forces of nature. He willed to control them; he willed to modify his environment to serve his ends and the experiences within himself and freedom so to do; and he did it.

Some have said that man is just an automaton; he reacts instinctively to external stimuli; beyond that he is nothing. And yet there is no scientific warrant for that statement at all. In many instances man does react instinctively to his environment; in many instances man is the slave of forces which he cannot control, but in many instances, equally as many, man is master of his own destiny. He is part of a race and his reactions in many regards will be the common reactions of the race, and yet he is an individual, a personality, and his actions and his decisions cannot be in every instance foretold on the basis of the common reactions of the race. He thinks for himself and he wills for himself and, what is most important, he experiences in his own life the

possibility of choice of the will--and that makes him free. And because he is free he is responsible, and because he is responsible he is rewarded and punished for his acts--not always as we would like to have him rewarded and punished; not always in a physical sense; not always as an individual, but in life there is community responsibility and individual responsibility; there is community happiness and there is community suffering, for a human personality is a social product, a community product.

Good leads to good and evil leads to evil.

If the law of causation means anything it means just that in the moral world; and that which is good in the life of man, and his good acts and his good deeds, will result in good either to himself or his family or his community or to mankind, either now or ultimately; but the results of good are good and the results of evil are evil.

Man is free--free not to do anything he likes; nature has been too kind to him to permit him that--free within the limits of the moral law. Man is free to develop himself; man is free to make actual that which is potential in him; man is free to follow his destiny, free to seek God. That is what freedom means; all else is license. Man is free to concentrate his mind and his will upon a purpose and to see that purpose through without deviating from it because of chance passions and chance ^{errors} ~~desires~~. He is free to follow his highest purposes, and that is freedom in the truest sense of the word.

To sum up, then, a modern man can believe in God, in his comradeship with God, in his freedom to grow and develop. A modern man is free to believe in the reality of the spirit and in the reality of the spiritual, and the value of ideal and the nobility of striving, in the certainty of moral law. He is even free, if so he wills, to believe in immortality; for if the world strengthens his spirit, if all that is has its highest expression in the spiritual, then the spiritual is indestructible, for even the physical is indestructible.

In a universe conceived to be the dwelling place of the Infinite Spirit there is no room for death--only for change, for transformation--not for death. There is no death! Everything lives, everything moves on the stream of the eternal vital energy, which is God. We may not know the conditions of our immortality; we may not know the state in which our spirit disembodied lives, but we may believe--and nothing in science contradicts the belief--that our ego, our personality that is in us, which is part of this All-Mind of the universe,--that remains, that abides through all the fluctuations of time and place and all the changes which our mortal body will pass through.

So that in this age of scientific truth and discovery the modern man can still take into his soul the great beliefs which have helped mankind across the innumerable obstacles on its hard pilgrimage to happiness. Faith! That is what makes life possible. Faith--that is what makes

progress possible. Faith--that is what gives a man a sense of at-homeness with the world and a sense of worthwhileness in life, and a sense of peace concerning his ultimate destiny.

The Rabbis say, "God gave to Moses 613 commandments which were the expressions of religious life. David came and he reduced the 613 commandments to 13"--found in that great psalm, Psalm 15--"Lord, who shall dwell in thy dwellingplace?" The prophet Isaiah came and reduced them still further, and then Micah came and reduced them to three. "Thou hast been told, O man, what is good and what the law doth require of thee, for do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

And then the prophet Habakkuk came and reduced the whole of religion and expressed it all in one doctrine: "The true man, the righteous man shall live by his faith." And Amos came and restated the same faith: "Seek me and live."

The quest of God--faith! That is the destiny of human life.

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