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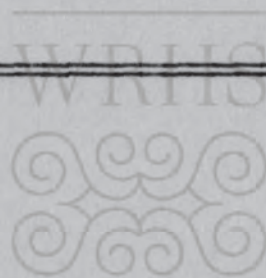
Is the modern man losing his religion?, 1927.

"IS THE MODERN MAN LOSING HIS RELIGION?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MARCH 6, 1927, CLEVELAND, O.



(I shall try to make myself heard this morning, although I am suffering from a decided cold. In case that you do not hear me, I trust that you will forgive me. This has been a rather eventful week for me. Last Monday evening, on my way to a lecture in New York, some New Yorker decided to dispute the road with the people who were driving me through a close place, with the result that he won. Our car was forced to the curb and we were all turned over. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, and twenty minutes later I was on the platform speaking. I told the people in the audience in New York City one ought to perform an old Jewish ritual almost hourly--the ritual of Benshen. I don't know how many of you are acquainted with the term "Benshen" but the man who escapes miraculously from a danger or an accident is in duty bound to pronounce a prayer. I told them the story of the Scotchman who was on his way from London to Edinburgh on the train. At every station the Scotchman would get off the train and go into the depot, stay there a while and come back again. This happened with the second and the third and the fourth stopping place of the train, until an Englishman sitting next to him became rather perturbed about it, and said: "Brother, I don't want to be inquisitive, but can you tell me just why you get off at the station, go into the depot and come back again?" "Well," he said, "friend, I'll tell

you. I was to the doctor this morning in London, and he told me that I might drop dead at any moment, so that I am buying my way home from station to station." In New York City one ought to say Benshen from street to street.

That was Monday night. Sunday night I was addressing an audience at the Mecca Temple in New York City, and as I was working my way up laboriously to a climax, I happened to make mention of the War and of the troubles which came to our people during the last war, and suggested that the sufferings of the last war might have been the footprints of the Messiah, the birththroes of the Messianic days, and just then an individual got up from the audience, walked up to the stage, stood alongside of me, and facing the audience said, "I am the Messiah!" I told the people then that the Messiah had come quicker than I had bargained for. So that, all in all, I had a very eventful week in New York. I think from now on I am going to stay in Cleveland).

I have chosen this subject, "Is The Modern Man Losing His Religion?" because men have been asking themselves this question very frequently in the last few years. You are acquainted with the questionnaires which have appeared in our newspapers, in our magazines, and which have been circulated through the various colleges and universities in an effort to elicit the degree of faith which the average American, the average man of today

possesses, and all this self-searching and self-examination is an indication that something has changed, that there is need for a reexamination. The answers to these questionnaires have, in the main, indicated that men have not lost their faith. And yet somehow the very act of taking these questionnaires points to a change in attitude, a radically new alignment which deserves consideration.

In answering this question, Is the modern man losing his faith? I should first of all like to define the term. What do I mean by the modern man? What do I mean by the faith which the modern man is said to be losing? Wherein does the modern man differ from the man of the Middle Ages or the man of ancient days? Well, in the first place, the man of today is much more self-reliant; he depends much more upon himself and upon his own judgment. In the last century, or in the last few decades, man has won so many and such amazing scientific victories as to give him a sense of power hitherto unpossessed by him. He has succeeded in probing into the very depth of what heretofore seems to be the mystery of his life, beyond his reach and his comprehension, and he has succeeded in wresting the secret, in solving these problems which have tantalized him in the past. He has gained so much more knowledge, and with knowledge has come control, and with control has come self-reliance, self-confidence. Fear--which in the olden days drove so many people into the bosom of the church--fear is no longer the determining factor in human life. Man does not stand

terrified even before the unknown.

That is the first, to my mind, very significant mark of distinction between the modern man and the man of the previous centuries. And secondly, the man of today is no longer dependent on the church as he was in the olden days. In the olden days the church determined or denominated the political life of the country. The church and state were one. Where the church did not actually rule, it controlled policies. In the olden days the church controlled the educational system--all the schools, the elementary schools, the colleges, the universities, for the creation of the church, and the man who sought an education went to a church institution. In the olden days the church controlled the whole social and philanthropic life of the country; all the charitable institutions were the achievements or the creations of the religious denomination of the church, and people who sought relief went to church institutions.

Now in modern life church and state have been separated. The church has been progressively forced out of the political life of a nation. The educational system has been secularized largely. Our educational system has become a lay system and our philanthropic life has been turned over in most instances to lay organizations. So that modern man is much more independent of the church, of the institutional religion, than the man of decades or generations ago, and the sphere of the church has therefore

been circumscribed more sharply and more narrowly defined, so that the church does no longer touch the life of man at every point as it did in the past.

And the third distinction that has characterized modern man as against the man of the past is the fact that the modern man is much more free in thought and attitude; he is not as prone to docile submission, to authority, as the man of long ago. We are still largely controlled by authority. We ought not to be under any delusions about that point. We are still moved, consciously or unconsciously, by the authority of the home, of the family, by our political party of our nation; but, nevertheless, the man of today does insist, as far as he can, upon asserting the primacy of his own intellect as against the primacy of tradition or authority. It is no longer sufficient to bring the weight of authority, or the ipse dixit of some ecclesiastical body to satisfy the man of today. He must find the sanction in conviction, an inner conviction; he must find his authority in himself, in his mind, in his soul.

And these three factors, to my mind, quite definitely single out the man of today from his progenitors: he is more self-reliant; he is more independent of the church; he is freer in his thinking.

What do I understand by "religion" when I ask the question: Has the modern man lost, or is the modern man losing his religion? There are three kinds of

religion. We ought clearly to have in mind what kind of religion we speak of when we posit this question. In the first place, there is the institutional religion--the church. To most people the church represents religion. Institutional religion assumes that the church, its cult, its ritual, its ceremony, its practices, are an end in themselves, and in order that a man may win salvation he must belong to a certain definite church, and must prescribe to certain definite doctrines and must perform certain definite cult rituals. That is still the belief of most human beings today. The church has an end in itself, and no man is truly religious unless he belongs to the right kind of a church.

Then there is the second type of religion, which is dogmatic religion. This type of religion insists that in order for a man to gain salvation he must subscribe to certain dogmas, to certain creeds, to certain beliefs. These beliefs need not be accredited by his mind or his reason, and these beliefs need not be imperative to his spiritual life, but they are, nevertheless, essential to his religious life. These notions or creeds may have to do with certain historical events which are said to have taken place, or with certain miracles which are said to have occurred. Your mind may not accredit them, you may feel that you can be a good man without believing in them, and yet dogmatic religion insists that unless you accept them, unless you subscribe to them, you are not the truly

religious man. Among such beliefs I would include belief in the literal inspiration of the Bible, or in the divinity of Jesus, or in bodily resurrection, or in heaven and hell, and in similar doctrines which in most of the orthodox religions of today are still basic and indispensable articles of creed.

That is the second type of religion. Most people still think of religion along those lines. Then there is the third type--religion as pure faith, a religion as pure ethics, religion as faith in God, faith in the moral order of the universe, faith in the mandatory quality or the inherited quality of the moral law of the life of man--religion as the spiritual adventure of the human soul, the quest of the ultimate reality of life, religion in its spiritual essence.

Now the question, then, Is modern man losing his religion? can be answered both affirmatively and negatively, as you select one or the other of these definitions of the term. If you mean by religion institutional religion, dogmatic religion, then my answer would be that the modern man is, to a large degree, losing his religion. For the man of today will not continue to look upon the church, the physical church and the ritual of the church, as indispensable to salvation. He will not discard the church, he will not abandon it. He knows that all life expresses itself in institutions and practices and customs and symbols. He knows that man does not live in a world

of abstractions; nor can he be in a world of abstractions. Every word I speak is a symbol; every gesture I make is a symbol. Architecture is a physical expression of man's sense of beauty. So is music; so is painting; so is sculpture; so is poetry. These are all physical manifestations of certain inner spiritual longings and up-surgings of life. And so it is with the church, the temple, the synagogue, the festivals, the religious customs. They are physical expressions of inner spiritual values. And so the modern man will not likely discard them, disregard them and say they are utterly of no value. They are of tremendous value in life, if nothing else than pedagogic value. They remind you of things; they stimulate you; they remind you of certain spiritual truths. But the modern man will insist that the institution in itself is not an end in itself but only a means; that it possesses no sacrosanctus quality in and of itself; that only as it serves the spiritual hunger of man does it possess values for him.

And equally so with dogmatic religion.

Modern man will not subscribe to doctrines which his mind cannot accredit, which his spirit does not need. Modern man is going to reject everything that is irrational and revolutionary in religion. Orthodoxy is played out, not only in religion but in politics, in economics, in sociology. Orthodoxy is the enemy of evolution. That which was orthodox, the right path for our forefathers a hundred years ago or five hundred years ago, is not necessarily the

orthodox, the right path for their children of today.

So that the modern man will not blindly subscribe to doctrines such as the literal inspiration of sacred books or the divinity of a human being, or bodily resurrection, or a physical heaven and hell, in spite of all the weight of tradition and in spite of all the pompous, seeming evidence which long-established usage bring to these beliefs. Modern man will discard them, in most instances has already discarded them.

But modern man is not losing his religion if you accept the third and, to my mind, the only true definition of religion--faith in God, faith in the moral order of the universe, faith in the mandatory quality of the moral law, faith in man's quest for the ultimate truth and the ultimate reality. Man will not abandon God because man cannot abandon God. Man needs God all too desperately in his life to reject him. You see, there are already two attitudes towards life, or two interpretations towards life which man should take. You may take the materialistic point of view, or you may take the religious point of view. There is no other. The materialistic point of view is this: the universe is a blind machine. It is here. We do not know how it came to be here, but it is here. It is operated--not controlled, because control implies intelligence--it works along certain lines. It is heedless of human life; it is not particularly concerned with man; it is certainly not concerned with the individual man. The

universe and the world upon which man lives is just one blind, cold, heedless machine--Nature; and that all things are reduced to matter; all things are physical, and that spirit and soul, the things and qualities of which man speaks, are, after all, only manifestations of matter. That is one attitude, one philosophy that you can take with you through life, and that philosophy, if intelligently followed through, logically carried out to the conclusion, that attitude leads to despair, to pessimism, to hopelessness, leads into a blind alley. If that is all life is then I am just a cog in the blind machine, to be ground down in the process after a few years and returned to dust. Why all my strivings and why all my ambitions and why should I aspire to be better and to be nobler and finer? "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Even in the eating and the drinking and the process of being merry there is always the drop of poignancy in the cup, the bitter thought that before long we shall crumble into the dust and be annihilated. That way is the way of madness.

And the other point of view that one can take, the only other point of view, is that the universe is not a mechanism but a personality, and that in the universe there is an Intelligence, wise, infinitely wise, infinitely powerful; that this Intelligence is purposeful, and that the universe has a purpose and a tendency and a goal, and that man is part of this purpose, and that man in his struggles and in his aspirations is evolving part of

this divine purpose, and that man is linked up with this personality through his own finite personality. That is the religious point of view. That is the universe with God in it. That philosophy is the philosophy of hope and of progress. That gives man a chance; that makes man feel that he is creator; that he does something in the world; that his actions and his sacrifices and his aspirations are not futile and wasted; that he is a co-creator in a vast scheme. That is the religious point of view.

I believe that man needs the religious point of view for his progress, for his happiness, and therefore man, the modern man, the man of tomorrow, is not likely to reject God. There is nothing in science the modern man knows which militates against this religious interpretation of life. Science, in fact, lends us a great deal of encouragement in this, our faith. In the last few years science has taken the most stubborn of substances, the most material of material things, and has reduced them to atoms, to electrons, to energy. The rock, the stone, the cold piece of metal, wood,--that the scientist has reduced in his laboratory to a stream of energy. And what is energy? Reduced to its ultimate is not energy spirit, and is not all spirit energy? And is not the whole of the universe, the whole of the visible and the phenomenal universe but one sea of energy, living, moving, throbbing, infinitely and endlessly? And that all things which exist, from amoeba to man, from the animate to the inanimate, are

expressions, manifestations of this all-embracing sea of energy--God? If man thinks, then there is thought in the world; if man lives, then there is life in the universe. There must be a source whence this thought and this life comes, and that source of thought involves thought, and that source of life involves life. That is God.

And so science today, or in the years to come, does not undermine the strong foundations of faith, but rather lends it basis and support. So that if you ask me: Is modern man losing his religion? and you mean by religion his faith in God, with its corollary moral code, with its corollary man's irresistible yearning to adore, to revere, which is prayer--and that is all that prayer is--I say to you: No, modern man is not losing his religion. He cannot lose his religion. He needs his faith all too desperately in his workaday life--today, tomorrow and for all eternity. He needs it. Nor is the man of today likely to make a religion of science. That has been suggested. It has been suggested that man should make a religion of a few bits of information which have come to him during his long gropings for truth. The French Revolution dethroned the old religion and established a new religion, and the heart of the new religion was the goddess of reason. Man forever after was to worship only reason. But it soon became apparent to most thinking people that man realizes all too well how puny his reason is to worship it. It is not what man does not know and what man cannot

control which call for his sense of reverence and worship, his religious instincts. Man will never make a religion of the few bits of information which he has gathered upon the shore of life like so many sea shells, because he knows how vast and unsearchable is the ocean beyond and about him. He knows, ~~or~~ he suspects, that regardless of the number of shells, the bits of knowledge which he will collect and add to his store of truth, there still remain the basic mysteries, the challenging and the unsolved mysteries of the whence and the whither and the why, the source and the goal and the purpose of all existence, which no scientific knowledge and no accumulation of facts can help him solve.

So he is not likely to make a religion of his science. In the last century there was a famous French philosopher, Auguste Comte, who suggested that man make a religion of positive philosophy. He called it "positive philosophy," because in his way of thinking human knowledge passed through three stages of development. First is the theologic stage, next was the metaphysical stage, and last was the positive stage. The theologic stage was when man thought that every phenomena possessed within it or outside of it a will which controlled it, and the metaphysical stage was when man imagined that every phenomena possessed some abstract principle within it or outside of it which controlled it. Now Comte said that man ought to discard both of these types of thinking--the theologic and the metaphysical. They lead nowhere; they

cannot help man. What man should be concerned with is positive knowledge, the co-relation of things with other things, the laws which control the physical, visible phenomena of life. In other words, scientific truth. And he suggested a religion built around positive knowledge; he suggested a religion of humanity in place of God. He put the abstract notion of humanity and called upon his fellow human beings to worship humanity; and he borrowed the whole vestments of the whole religion--sacraments and prayer and symbols and temples and priestcraft, all of it he borrowed for his new religion. He even organized a new calendar, a positivist calendar; and in place of saints he put the great scientists who advanced civilization and he called upon people to worship them. But he failed, because while people will admire scientists they will not worship them. They will worship saints, people who revere truth. They will burn incense before holiness and before spiritual and sacrificial idealism, and while people will be happy in the accumulation of knowledge and more knowledge, they will never make a religion of it. It is the great unknown and unknowable, it is that which is beyond the reach of man's mind and man's intuition, it is that over-world, which has always called forth man's worshipful instincts and his religion.

So that I am not at all concerned about modern man losing his religion. I am concerned with this: that the church will lose modern man because of its narrow-

sightedness and because of its heavy load of tradition and because of its blindness of insight in seeing that some of the orthodox churches of today, seeing that modern man is drifting away from the institutional and the doctrinal religion, have become desperate and are resorting to medieval tactics. The conflicts which have been waged in the southeast part of our country, the least enlightened part of the United States, about evolution, the desperate efforts that they have made by reactionary denominations to stifle scientific truth in order to maintain themselves in the saddle, is an indication they are losing ground. They have grown desperate; they will continue to lose ground; they will not succeed in stifling science. Galileo was tortured and made to retract when he declared that the earth revolved around the sun. The hand of the Inquisition was all-powerful, and he was forced to recant and retract; but through a bleeding mouth he yet was able to explain that yet it does move, and no papal bull and no church anathema and no edict of an ecclesiastical council could stop the earth from moving or could destroy a proved scientific doctrine.

The church would do well to revamp itself, to redraft its own theses, to scrap that which is antiquated, to pry loose the dead hand of the past, to align itself with the new thought, to seek science as an ally and not to war against science as an enemy. I am concerned that the church shall not lose the modern man through its

unwillingness to be true to itself, to its informing ideal, to its prophetic mission. Modern man looks to the church today, and he will look to the church tomorrow, as the sanctuary of human ideals, as the stronghold of the finest and the noblest of human aspirations, as the moral path-finder, as the pioneer, the ethical pioneer in the world. Now the church which is a laggard in its moral responsibility, the church which allies itself always with the reactionary forces in politics and in economics, that the church is doing in Mexico, that the church did in czarist Russia,--that church will lose the man of today and the man of tomorrow, that church is bound to be regarded not only as an anachronism but as a veritable obstacle in the way of progress. The church is a laggard in preaching from the house-tops, if you will, peace, universal peace. The church which blesses arms and bestows its benediction upon war, the church which is merely the lackey of the state in endorsing and sanctifying every vicious state policy of imperialism--as the church was, as all churches were during the last war--that church will continue to lose the affection and the reverence of the modern man.

The modern man wants the church to stand, if necessary, alone, in the midst of a world that has gone mad with lust for things, for possessions, for increase in material wealth--individually and nationally and internationally. The church, alone if necessary, must stand

for the things of the spirit--for truth, for justice, for righteousness, for the weak, for the denied, for the dispossessed, for the orphan, for the widow, to all who need befriending and help, and when the church will do that, when the church will regain the voice of Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah, when the church will again become prophetic, speaking the word that challenges, and oftentimes that hurts, the word which ultimately brings healing to suffering mankind, then the church will grow with human progress and become a blessing and a boon to mankind.

Modern man is not losing his religion. He may have lost the religion of his grandfather. He has not lost his religion. He may have lost a set of holy doctrines which the past bequeathed unto him. He has not lost his inner longings and his inner aspirations, his cravings for divinity and sublimity. Modern man has not lost his faith in God; he has not lost his faith in the intelligence and the ethical composition of the universe; he has not lost his sense of kinship with the universe and the universal spirit; he has not lost his sense of reverence and adoration of the grandeur and sublimity, which is God, in God's universe. And with all that, he has not lost his religion.

A new religion, if you will, is being fashioned by the modern man. It will be new only in the sense that the trappings the perishable hand of a passing generation has woven around religion has been discarded.

It will be the old religion in the sense that it will ground itself in these eternal verities and sincerities of human life--in God, in the essential spiritual quality of all life, in righteousness, in justice, in truth, in beauty.

We need not worry, friends, about modern man ever losing that religion.

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