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157

Box
56

Folder
540

What is Permanent in Civilization?, 1937.

490

WHAT IS PERMANENT IN CIVILIZATION?

2nd of series of four lectures on general theme:

"Things Permanent."



By

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At

The Temple

On

Sunday morning, November 14, 1937

Last week, Friends, I spoke on the subject: "What is Permanent in Character?". I called attention to a number of reverences which I regarded as indispensable to character - reverence for the human body, reverence for the human intellect, reverence for the human spirit, reverence for human handiwork and reverence for society.

Things which are permanent to civilization are the factors which express and symbolize these reverences to society, which nurture them. A society which is organized to expand the foundations of these values of character is a civilized society and the degree of the success in coordinating the life around these central motifs is the degree of civilization. Progress or retrogression in this direction, in these fields, is the index of the growth or decay of civilization.

Somewhere Emerson said that "the true test of civilization is not the census, nor the size of cities nor the crops, but the kind of man the country turns out." The individual is not the criterion of civilization. There have been decadent civilizations, uncivilized communities which produced extraordinary individuals of amazing perfection - but isolated individuals. It is rather the nature and quality of the society as a whole - its law, its institutions, its cultural interest and achievements, the general level of physical and moral well-being of the community as a whole which is the real measure of civilization.

There are many delusions tied up with the concept of civilization. One of them is indicated in this quotation by Emerson - the size delusion, the Tower of Babel Complex, the effort of communities or societies to climb heavenward, as it were, on plateaus of brick and stone rather than climb upward on the rungs of truth, beauty and goodness... delusion of size as the index of great civilization. I remember going through the City of Rome and seeing on many public buildings and inside of the lobbies of hotels an inscription which Mussolini evidently ordered to be placed in all conspicuous places in the country. "O nourishing sun, thou art unable to see anywhere on the globe anything greater than the City of Rome."

The larger the population, the greater the cities, the more cluttered up the streets are with automobiles, the faster people move, communicate with one another, the greater the civilization of that particular country. That, of course, is a delusion, for size is no index of the condition or health of civilization nor, for that matter, does it indicate which civilization will survive. Great centers of civilization in the past were rather like microscopic countries - Greece, Judea. Many countries and empires became so great like the dinosaurs of old who perished because of their very unwieldy bulk - so these communities buckled under because of size...

That is the first delusion concerning this thing called civilization. It has very little to do with size.

Another delusion is that we are civilized and that the ancients were not. This is part of the smug insolence of our scientific age. It is not true. It is also not true that the past far exceeded the present. There are many people who are inclined to say that everything which exists already existed in the past, that there is nothing new in the present, that the past is a series of pluperfects. There are historians who look on life as a cycle of degenerations, the Gold, Silver, Bronze and Iron ages. They are inclined to look through the past as through a magnifying glass. Every achievement in the past is magnified. Everything in the present is depreciated. This, too, is a delusion. It is quite impossible to compare present civilization with past civilizations because our knowledge is inadequate. It is true that in certain fields some of the older civilizations far exceeded, and in certain other fields ours exceeds theirs. There were mountain peaks attained by the ancients - the things of the mind, the things of the spirit, in art, in philosophy, in religion - there were peaks which we have not outdistanced or even reached and some of the magnificent achievements of ancient peoples still stand today.

We ought not, therefore, to be cultural upstarts in the sense of allocating to our age and our civilization excellence to all things.

There is yet a third delusion - that civilization is a continuous unbroken uninterrupted evolution. That is also a delusion. There have been terrible and tragic recessions in civilizations. There

have been whole civilizations which have collapsed or been overthrown through central forces. When a civilization was destroyed, it sometimes took centuries or millennia before that civilization began to stir again. If all the gains of the past civilizations had been conserved and if every age could begin where the past left off, men would be advanced fifty thousand years towards real civilization.

Eagean civilization - flourished. It had magnificent culture - art, architecture, science, learning, self-building. Then came invasion - a whole civilization collapsed and was completely destroyed. For a thousand years, that part of the universe remained as if that civilization had never been. Then, the Greeks, themselves, settled there and started a new civilization in the very place where they had destroyed it.

That is what happened to Rome. - Old civilization destroyed. - Later new civilization built on ruins of old.

No one can guarantee the unbroken progress of civilization. Civilizations have a way of completing a cycle and then going into decay and sinking into what seems to be coma. The most that can be said if one surveys the whole history of man, recorded or unrecorded, from the past to the present, the most than can be said when one studies more closely the history of man, from the stone age to television, is that his progress, as someone has said, seems to be along a rising trail, undulating, shifting, at times ~~xx~~ sinking precipitously, but somehow, if you take a long view of history, ^{it is} a long steady rising trail.

And lastly, there is a delusion that somehow a single gifted race is responsible for all this which we call civilization. The truth of the matter is that no race has a monopoly over civilization. Civilization was always shifting from the Nile Valley where it had its beginning, to the Eagean civilization, to Mesopotamia, to Judea, to Rome and the Oriental World back through the south-western world and finally right back to north-western civilization. All these races and cultures constantly interfused and a great amalgamation of cultures arose. It is gross arrogance for a race to credit itself with eternal excellence in the field of the human spirit. That is what the Nordics are doing. They would credit themselves with all the glory of civilization. The Nordics actually were produced by one of the most recent civilizations, and by the way, they are on the way to destroying that which they did build.

This should be said about civilization. The word civilization is derived from the word "Civis" which means citizen. It is tied up with the city, with development in cities - not on the farm. It is to the cities that the traders, merchants, the artists, priests, musicians and the men who have any particular aptitude or gift go. It is the city which produces wealth; the city, therefore, is the creator of civilization. The term rustic comes from the Latin word meaning country - boor, peasant. The Hebrew word "Am Ha-Aretz" means man of the earth - peasant, indicating that civilizations do not spring from the farm but from the city.

A city is a turbulent world of careers and ambitions, rivalries between groups, individuals. It is not simple. It cannot

be simplified. Therefore a simplified civilization is a contradiction in terms. Civilization is a continuous problem which requires a continuous solution. There is never a time when you can say - we have reached civilization. We are going to stay there, a final resting place, a Utopia.

Havelock Ellis says: "There is nothing so fragile as civilization and no high civilization has long ^{with}/stood the manifold to which it is exposed."

But in civilization, my Friends, just as in personal character, amidst change, there is nevertheless discernable certain Universals, certain classic things, golden threads which run through all civilization. These are, in my judgment some of the things which are permanent forces.

First, there is the outreaching after political freedom - that is, a condition of political life "where the ordinary man is neither the slave of an absolute monarch nor of a demagogue - ruled state, but an informed, inspired and consulted part of his community" - according to Wells. Every form of self-imposed authority in government has been tried by the human race. Some people think that the modern despotism which we call Fascism, Nazism or Bolshevism is a new phenomenon in history. Of course it isn't. There isn't any ~~i~~ conceivable form of despotism which mankind has not experienced before. Mankind has had its kings, its despots, its emperors, its feudal lords and has lived not by people who live in that society but from above. under every conceivable form of government, But mankind was never satisfied with it. Always there was the ideal of political freedom. And the free condition is not a recent advent in civilization. You will find it among the Nomadic people. You will find it among the early City-States where there was absolute democracy. You will find

it among the Jews throughout the ages. In every civilization there has been this desperate struggle for political emancipation. We thought we had it in the Nineteenth Century. But as I said a moment ago, civilization is a continuous problem requiring continuous solution. In the Nineteenth Century, with state absolutism on the one hand and democratic freedom on the other, the permanent character of civilization may be said to be the struggle for political freedom of civilization, the right of man to say - This I want and this I do not want. And everything which contributes to political freedom is a permanent contribution to civilization.

Secondly is the ideal of intellectual and spiritual freedom for the man who wants to know more, for the man who wants to be free to know more. Mind does not permanently reconcile itself to the role of handmaiden of any other activity of society. It wants to be mistress in its own right. And so with the spirit of man. Man's spirit does not reconcile itself to a permanent enslavement to orthodoxy, to tradition, to convention. It wants to be free to seek, to be on its own to work out own problems. Mankind has permitted itself to be a martyr for the sake of intellectual and spiritual freedom. Perhaps one of the most magnificent achievements of our civilization is the evidence of the privilege of education to the masses, the right of all men to share in this sacred boon of thinking. Schools and colleges and universities, scientific laboratories, churches and synagogues are the enduring symbols of civilization.

Thirdly, there is the ideal of economic freedom, man's reaching for a decent way of living, for a just share in the social goods, man's desire not to be exploited by his fellow men. The history of mankind is the bloody road of struggle, of the have nots against

and the haves, the poor against the rich, the exploited against the unexploited. Always men have sought a juster form of life. Always that vision has been denied by great groups of people and always there has been that desperate struggle.

Traced civilization from Roman to present -

Always there was a struggle for political freedom and economic freedom. Always there was a struggle for social justice.

Yet, what has been permanent in civilization has been the effort to find the Golden Mean whereby the masses would have economic security while at the same time man would be left free for human enterprise, Whatever contributes to the lessening of the brutality of the struggle for existence, whatever softens the hardships of human life, whatever arose to lift the burdens from the shoulders of those least able to bear them, is permanent to civilization. No civilization can last long upon foundations which are rotten and corrupt.

Another thing which is permanent in civilization, my Friends, is the ideal towards organization, the ideal of an organized society, the smaller unit, the home. The greatest menace to civilization in our day is the breaking up of homes, the appalling increase of divorces. That is a danger sign for the existence of American civilization. The ideal towards which we should work is an organized society in terms of organized communities which will administer properly for the benefit of the people, in terms of organized humanity. It is very difficult in these days of ours to understand this movement toward civilization because our

life is so fragmentized.

The ideal of man was to be not only a good man but a good fellow-man. That, of course, is the prerequisite to the ideal of peace which has always also been an enduring ideal of mankind.

Lastly, my Friends, there is that permanent ideal which is the ideal of beauty. "Beauty is a joy forever". Look with what love we treasure an antique, a broken article, a fragment of a poem. Anything that is beautiful, mankind takes to its heart because mankind needs much more than bread, Man needs great music, great art, great architecture. These are indispensable to a real civilization. Life must have loveliness, charm, grace beauty. It is the synthesis of all of these which makes up civilization.

Some years ago, I had an opportunity to address the convention of the Social Workers of America. It was during the days of the depress and I took occasion to say this:

"Pires, domes, and minarets are not religion; neither are radios, aeroplanes, and swarming, teeming cities civilization. The essence of civilization is a free, secure, and creative social life. The criteria of civilization are neither wealth, nor size, nor speed, nor invention, but the values which it places upon human personality, the rewards which it grants to labor and merit, the quality of its intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic interests and the stimulus which it gives to those social factors, which make human life sweeter, more confident, and more joyous. Measured by these criteria, our present-day civilization is but an ultra-modern expression of barbarism; and

the sharp contrast which exists between its social backwardness and its scientific progress only makes the fact more bewildering and, at the same time, more menacing."

This, my friends, I regard as permant in civilization, and by the way, our age is doing its utmost to ~~dest~~roy it. There has never been an age when such a concerted attack upon these enduring values was made, an attack upon political freedom, upon intellectual freedom, upon economic freedom. That you see all around you. The attack upon beauty - that and art and literature will come later on for whenever these freedoms are denied to the human people, art, literature begin to decline.

Civilization is again passing through one of its great periods of tribulation. It may well be that the civilization of the Western world will decline as a result of this major attack which is being made upon it today, if the forces which are interested in their preservation do not rally vigorously to their defense. Civilization is created by human beings and must be defended by human beings. When human beings no longer are interested in defending civilization, it becomes backward and declines. So far, up to the present the trail is still a rising trail. Let us hope that it will continue to rise.

1/ Last week - reverence -

The Perm. in C - factors - symbolizing - express - nurture

Soc. org. to expand - is C.

The degree of its success - coordinating life of group - motifs

Progress or retrogression in these fields - index, growth & decay

2/ Emerson (Just). "Men" or "Society" - not indiv. criticism

There have been unenvilized - decadent - produced extran. states

It is Nature & Quality of Soc. as a whole - laws etc - cust. &

Sp. standards tachew - its gen. level of unatphys. well being

Just - myself

WRHS



3/ This is First Delusion - "Size Delusion" - "Tower of Babel Conf."
climb to heaven by way -

Musolini Just

The larger the population - faster people more & common

Size no index to C. - health - power of survival

Athens etc. microscopic lands

Size - prophecy of decay - mammoth dinosaurs

unwieldy bulk.

4/ We are C. The Ancients were not. Surv. incident
Cultural upstarts

on the other hand - idealize - Cost to pt - Series of Plus-perfects
Cycles of degeneration - Gold, Silver, Bronze, Iron

= Then a magnifying glass

Thus, too, is a delusion - what people in particular mind

It is not possible to give unrewarding - ~~the same~~

Our knowledge of older C.

In certain fields - exceeded - In others

There are lost paths - Before some are

5/ Continuous, unbroken evolution - Terrible, tragic horror

Whole C - collapsed - destroyed - Took centuries to resume

If all the gain, lost C. conserved - 50.000.

The noble Aegean C - earliest in Europe - Wrecking, all etc
Indo-Europ. Barbarians - Greeks - 1000 yrs. later -
same locale

And so with the Roman C -

No one has guaranteed - rather - exhaust - cycle

the most that can be said - minors - 500.000

from Stone-Age to Television - a "Rising Trail"

understanding - ^{gaining} broader perspective - scanning - breathing

6/ No race - monopoly - Great centers moved from Nile -
interfusion - amalgam
Gross amalgam - eternal excellence - Under's last

7/ C. derived from "Civis" = citizen - Tied up - city.
C. develops in cities - Rustic, Boor - from the
It is to city that trader, artisan -

Wealth & Leisure -

Cradles - of arts, science -

From nature of its origin - highly involved

A city is a turbulent world of multitud. conflicting

It is not simple! It cannot be simplified!

A simplified C. is a contradiction in terms.

C. is a continuous problem -

A final, resting place - utopia (Ellis, Jude)

8/ But in C. as in charact. - amidst change - determable
certain Universals - classic - golden threads - the Perenn

9/ The Ideal of Pol. Freedom (Wells, Jude)

Every form of Super-imposed Authority inad - Nothing new

But always - the Ideal of Pol. Freedom - Along side of
Slave Trade - Free Trade - Nomads - city states

Struggle - long - unavoidable - 19 C. - To day.

Size as menace to liberty - Aristotle -

Education -

Everything which contributes - Ballot Box Symbol & C.

10. Ideal of Intel. & Spiritual Freedom.

To know more - To be free to know more!

{ Mind not as Hand maiden -
Spirit not shackled by orthodoxy - seek God -

Martyrdom -

All to share - Universal Education.

Schools, colleges - Churches - Citadel

11. Ideal of Econ. Freedom

A decent way of life - a just share - not exploited

History - record - bloody struggle - have have not

Always men sought to estab. a just life - Burden

Always Struggle - Spartacus

14-16c. Europe - Wat Tyler - Jacquerie - Peasant Wars

French Revol. - Russian Revol.

To-day - Left & Right - crush us

The bitter extremes - The Golden Means.

Whatever contributes - often brutality - security
lift burdens

12/ Ideal of Org. Society.

Home - nuclear - happy homes -

man's larger homes - His Friends - Community -

Manland - To be not only Mass - Fellowman -

Brotherhood - with all - Great Religions - League

Peace - and - Aristophanes -

The Internat. Community - Whatever Unites, integrates

13/ The Ideal of Beauty

"A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever" - Antique - Fragments

Head is not enough - Machines are not enough

Man needs great music, sculpture, architecture, literature

the dance, the song, the play = Zest -

Whatever adds to grace & charm - loveliness -

14/ There are Four -

- Pol. Freedom

- Intel. & Sp. Freedom

- Econ. Freedom

- Organized Soc.

- Ideal of Beauty

Just myself

Emerson

"The true test of C. is, not the census, nor the size of cities,
nor the crops, no, but the kind of man the country turns out"

Hamelock Ellis

"There is nothing so fragile as C. and no high C. has long with-
stood the manifold risks it is exposed to"

Mussolini.

"Alme Sol, Possis nihil urbe Roma, visere, maior

Wells.

"Where the ordinary man is neither the slave of an absolute
monarch nor of a demagogue-ruled state, but an informed,
informed and consulted part of his community"

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