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What's wrong with the American man?, 1955.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE AMERICAN MAN?

January 30, 1955

The subject which was assigned to me this morning, "What Is Wrong With the American Man?" can be answered in many ways. What is wrong, in the first place, with the American man, and what is wrong with all men - for that matter, with all women? We're just not perfect, and therefore there's a lot that's wrong with us. There have been writers, poets, theologians, who from earliest times have taken a rather low view of man, generally. To them, as one poet put it, "every prospect in the world pleases, and only man is vile." One of the foremost theologians of the Christian world, in fact the man who was responsible for the Protestant reformation, Martin Luther, had a very low estimate of man, in consequence of his theologic conception. He said, "We have altogether a confounded, corrupt, and poisoned nature, both in body and soul; throughout the whole of man is nothing that is good." Of course this point of view is part of the whole theologic concept of the Original Sin - that the whole human race was born, or made, corrupt by the original sin of the first man. It cannot save itself by any inner revolution of spirit, by its own good deeds; it can only be saved by the grace of God. But even those who take a higher view of man - there have been many such, even among theologians - who speak of man as being a little lower than the angel - even they can see that there is considerable imperfection in man. There is no man who sinneth not. When God created the world during the six days of creation, on each one of these days he created something else on the universe, when he completed that act of creation, he looked upon his handiwork and said, "It is good." (Hebrew) God saw that it was good. But when he gathered together the dust of the earth and fashioned man, the Bible does not say that God looked upon his handiwork and saw that it was good. Because man was not created good. Man was not created perfect.

He was created perfectable. The whole meaning of his life consists in his striving to perfect himself."We have the aspirations of creators and the propensities of quadrupeds," someone said. That is true. And the whole effort of man is to rise above the level of the quadruped, to become less of an animal, more of a man. Not to become a superman, but just to become a fulfilled and a completed human being. So we may all begin with the axiom or the proposition that what is wrong with the American man and what is wrong with the American woman and what is wrong with all men is that they are simply not perfect. That holds good of the man or woman in the house next door and that holds good of the man or woman in your house, ourselves. And to expect perfection of men is one of the great sources of unhappiness in the world. And to expect perfection from woman is likewise a great source of unhappiness. And the great crystallized wisdom that ultimately comes to intelligent human beings is to know how and to learn how to live with a degree of imperfection.

In the second place, the American man is no different from the European man in any essential regard. The same question that you ask, "What is wrong with the American man?" you can ask, "What is wrong with the European man?" The American man simply lives in a different setting, in a different cultural environment, created for him and by him in this New World - this environment of traditions of pioneering and technological progress, the speeding up of life by the conceptions of equality and democracy, by the mass media of communication - all these things have impacted upon the American man, and he shows evidences of his distinctive environment. The European man is rapidly coming to be influenced by these standards of the American man too. American standards, American ideas, American literature and movies, comics are invading the world of the European man - in fact the whole world. Some of the characteristics of that we choose to ascribe to the American man are coming to be distinctly noticeable in the European man as well.

In a real sense there is no typical American man, either physically or mentally or emotionally or morally. There are all kinds of people here as elsewhere - the

good and the bad and the middling, the kind and the selfish, the wise and the stupid, the bigots and the men of good will, the reactionaries and the radicals, the men of good taste and the vulgarians, and those in between. There is no typical American.

There is no way of taking a Gallup poll to determine how many of each kind there are in the United States, and it is rather unprofitable to generalize.

I have noticed in recent years in our movies and television and radio that there have been attempts to present the average American family man as a sort of a good-natured, rather simple, blundering, somewhat inept individual who, but for his competent and intelligent and tolerant little woman - his wife - would be altogether lost and helpless in the field of human relationships and of domestic life. This picture that you see on your television programs and the radio from time to time may be flattering to some women who covertly crave a feeling of superiority over their men-folks, but it does not, I am afraid, correspond to anything in reality. Certainly not in all cases, and certainly that type is equally to be found among women.

The average American man is no "shlemiel" in his home such as you find portrayed in the case of Mr. Riley or in Ralph Crandle. Anyway, it would be unwise for girls to get married with this picture of a husband in mind. She's likely to be disappointed. But there are some such people. You and I know some such people and they're really not worth having - they're not a (Hebrew). And they are not typical Americans - or typical humans, for that matter.

A woman wants a husband whom she can love and respect - love for his goodness and devotion and respect for his competence, good judgment, his reliability in emergencies, his strength of character - in other words, an adequate man, not

necessarily a dominant man. And that holds true the other way around!

The man who leaves the management of the home and the rearing of the children entirely to his wife and is content with being simply the good provider is not fulfilling his true role of husband and father. He is not making his maximum contribution - the contribution of himself - his heart, his mind, his experience to this cooperative project which is the home. He may be a very generous paymaster, but he is not an intelligent parent.

That is one of the things that is wrong, I am afraid, with some American men - perhaps with many of them. He is too busy to be a real (Hebrew) master of the house - not in the sense of dominating, ordering the house, but in the sense of looking upon the home and the family as part of his life and of his having a real role and function day by day in all that goes on in the home - the true family man. In fact this term "family man" has come to have a certain condescending overtone - something not very complimentary, in fact. It suggests a sort of a - something that's not quite mannish, something old-fashioned.

This is also wrong, of course, with quite a number of American women. They too are too busy to be (Hebrew) the real mistress of the home who looketh well to the ways of her household, and "whose children rise up and call her blessed." She leavesthe rearing of her children with the maid in the home or with the teacher in the school or to the playmates in the neighborhood and she is too busy elsewhere, at meetings, social functions, parties - amusing herself or otherwise occupied.

The average man of our acquaintance - not the average statistical man - but the average man whom you and I know - is a devoted husband and father, loves his home, exerts himself to the utmost to provide for the family - oftentimes more than they need. He becomes terribly concerned and worried when anything goes wrong, especially when there is sickness in the family. There is nothing too good for

his family - he gives them everything but himself. He does not grow up with his children and they do not grow up, in a real sense, with him. He is not vitally and excitingly involved in their growing up, in their schooling, in their play, in their reading, in their problems, except when these problems become very serious and menacing. There is not enough of living together, of participation in the common adventure of a family growing up, not enough of sharing of basic and fundamental interests. Take one example - the American man wants his children to grow up god-fearing religious men and women. He fully realizes the importance of religious training. He realizes that the great crisis of our age is the fact that irreligion has swept through the world and is toppling the centers of human freedom and dignity, and he is even content, the average American man, to see that his child attends religious school, but in nine cases out of ten, he himself never sets the example of an active participator in the religious discipline, in the discipline of worship.

The other day I came across a rather interesting story which is told by a noted American clergyman, Dr. Luccock. This is taken from the Literary Digest, this story which I am about to read to you - which is not a story, really, but a parable, but it points up what I am endeavoring to say-what's wrong with the American man:

"Last Sunday our pastor asked Jimmy Mitchell, just back from two years in the army in Korea, if he'd be guest speaker at our church. Jimmy refused at first. Then, with a funny light in his eye, he said he would if the congregation sang "Onward, Christian Soldiers" just before he began. So we gave forth with song, and Jimmy waded in. This is what he said:

"You have been singing,
Like a mighty army
Moves the church of God.

"That might have been all right once. The trouble now is that about ten million

men know exactly how an army moves and it doesn't move the way a lot of you folks in our church do. Suppose the army accepted the lame excuses that many of you think are good enough to serve as alibis for not attending church.

"Imagine this, if you can. Reveille 7 a.m. Squads on the parade ground. The sergeant barks out 'Count Fours. One! Two! Three! Number Four missing. Where's Private Smith?'

"'Oh,' pipes up a chap by the vacant place, 'Smith was out late last night and needed the sleep. He said he would be with you in spirit.'

"'That's fine,' says the sergeant. 'Remember me to him! Where's Brown?'

"'Oh,' puts in another chap, 'he's playing golf. He gets only one day a week for recreation, you know.'

"'Sure, sure,' is the sergeant's cheerful answer. 'Hope he has a good game. Where's Robinson?'

"'Robinson,' explains a buddy, 'is sorry not to greet you in person, but he is entertaining guests today. Besides, he was at drill last week.'

"Thank you,' says the sergeant, smiling. 'Tell him he's welcome any time he is able to drop in.'

"Did any conversation like that ever happen in the army? Don't make me laugh. Yet you hear stuff like that every week in the church, and said with a straight face, too.

"Like a mighty army! If our church really moved like a mighty army, a lot of you folks would be court-martialed!"

Of course this is all said about "goyyim" in a church. It couldn't be said about a synagogue or a temple, you know. Not enough active participation - giving of self, giving direction - not telling what to do, not financing a project, but personally participating in a project with everybody in the home - not merely a matter of church-going, religion, but in every other situation. The absence of that is something, in my humble judgment, which is wrong, with the American man.

There is something else, I believe, that's wrong. The American man seems to live and work under excessive emotional pressure. They are too tense in their work and even in their play. For some reason or other I get the impression that a good number of my friends are terribly driven. Physicians tell us that the incidence of death in men in the United States from stomach ulcers which are often caused by worry and emotional strain is five times as high as in women. And alcoholism, likewise a product of strain and tension, is six times as high in men as in women.

- Now the wonder is that in a civilization like ours where men are not forced to work long hours to earn a living, where time is available for leisure and relaxation and recuperation, why do so many people work themselves frantically into premature graves? Is it to keep up with the Joneses? But the Joneses are no happier. Is any man any happier with his ulcers because his wife has a mink coat? And is his wife any happier?

The old Rabbis whom we so readily discount because they lived a long time ago and perhaps wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic - the old Rabbis in their vast wisdom understood a great deal about life. And we read in the (Hebrew) "Ethics of the Fathers" (Hebrew) "the more business, the more property, the more anxiety." And the post-script in the twentieth century is "the more anxiety, the more ulcers."

The mind of the average man of our acquaintance is, I am afraid, too much centered on the business of achieving material success with the concept of material success not having any well-defined limits. So he burns himself up. The same rabbis said, (Hebrew) "the more self-culture, the more education in the widest sense of the term, the more self-development, the more life." Now life can be thin and vapid and meager and empty. And life can be rich and full and colorful and abundant. The same number of years would not yield the same number of satisfactions. It is culture, in the widest sense of the word, which makes the difference. The full development of mind and soul, the cultivation of many interests, the unlocking of many doors,

of intellectual and spiritual adventure - that's what increases and sweetens life.

I read a great deal of books on theology and I hear a great deal about the crisis in society, the crisis in religion, the crisis in human life today, as if crisis is inherent in the very structure of the human being. In my judgement, the real crisis in human life is not the fact that we must sooner or later die; it is not the awareness of our finiteness, of our insurmountable finiteness; what is inevitable and what is inherent and what is universal does not constitute a crisis. It is the needless and profligate waste of our limited years, the unessayed tasks, the talents which are left withering because of disuse, all the summoning but untrodden ways of mind and soul, it is these which constitute the cause of our spiritual malaise and all our vast and deep-founded sorrows.

The man who does not fulfill himself is ultimately the unhappy man, and I am afraid that the average man of our acquaintance is so absorbed in his business or his profession, so one-sided in the pursuit of material success - to the exclusion of so much else in him which should be expressed, which should be allowed to blossom and to flower - that individual is restive, and to a degree unsuspected even by himself unhappy. We are incomplete. We are lop-sided. So much of us is starved. So much of us lies fallow.

It is not that every man, in order to be happy, must be a scholar, a high-brow, or what we call today contemptuously an "egghead." By the way, this covered contempt of the intellectual is part of what is wrong with the American man. Because if there is anything which distinguishes man from the brute it is reasoning faculty. I say it is not that every man in order to be happy must be a scholar or an artist or a high-brow. Many professional scholars and artists and high-brows are very unhappy. What I am referring to is the fact that every man owes it to himself to live up to the hilt of his innate talents and capacity, whatever they are. Every man owes it to himself to explore to the utmost his own mind, to discover himself -

what are his talents, what are his skills, what are his aptitudes, what are his interests, and to give himself a chance to try them out before he dies. And this requires time. This requires energy and application. But when all of our time and all of our energy are channeled into _____, these manifold potentialities of ourselves remain untapped, unexplored, and we end our days, in many instances, strangers to ourselves. I think that is something basically wrong with many American men.

And finally, what is wrong with the American man - with many of them - I am not generalizing and I caution you against generalization because a generalization is a facile substitute for thought - what is wrong with many American men is the fact that they conform too much. Years ago, you will recall, the American novelist Sinclair Lewis made that the theme of many of his important works, through the portrait of a Mr. Babbit, for example, a type of the American conformist, who, after a bit of a struggle, succumbs to the accepted patterns of thought and opinion of the people around him. He finds that it is too risky not to conform if he wants to become a solid and substantial and successful citizen. But since the days of Sinclair Lewis, the trends to conformity have increased. Now it is almost a political must to conform. For a man to express an independent judgment is to get himself branded as a dangerous radical or red.

There is not only political and economic pressure about us to conform. There is this settled pressure of the popular, commercialized art about us - standards which are set for us by these mass, low-level literature of our day, and the radio and the television, which tend to isolate the man or the woman who may possess better taste and better discrimination and who rebels against the banality and vulgarity of much that is presented in this mass media of communication. I am not indicting all of our art and our literature, our radio and our television. Some of the programs and some of the books are extraordinarily fine. But you know

what I mean. There is created around us, like a circum-ambient atmosphere, standards of taste, of judgment, of evaluation, which press conformity upon us so that our opinions and our tastes become stereotyped. We accept and we conform too readily. The true mark of the free and educated man is his considered independence of taste and judgment. Too many people repeat automatically, as if quoting some unimpeachable and infallible truth, what they read yesterday or the week before in Time, or Life, or Fortune, or some other million dollar and million reader spokesman of the status quo.

It's good to get off in a corner, as it were, and compose your own thoughts, formulate your own opinion after independent reflection, and not to be afraid to deviate. That's what wrong with many American men - they're afraid to deviate - but to have independent judgment, intelligent independent judgment - not to be just an - you say yes, I say no. One must be informed. One must read, study; one must reach out for higher standards of excellence, and one must not be ashamed of reaching out for these higher standards of excellency.

Well, I've spoken of what's wrong with the American man. I don't want to give you the impression that there is nothing right with the American man. There's a lot that's right. Why should I tell you that - you know it. There's nothing wrong with him that cannot be corrected. These are not organic shortcomings that are incorrigible. It takes a new attitude, new point of view, new resolution to correct these wrongs, these imperfections. Taken all in all, the civilization which the American man is producing is nothing to be ashamed of. There has been a great democratization, not only of wealth in America, but of culture. More and more people of increasingly large numbers are reaching out for these higher standards of excellence in taste. I am not at all pessimistic about American civilization or the American man. There is definite discernible progress all around us.

5/ Any way - it would not be wise in ~~any~~ any ways to get married with this picture of a husband in mind. She is likely to be disappointed: There are ^{some} some such - and I know some such - and they are not worth having! They are not a distinction!

6/ A woman wants a husband whom she can love and respect - love for his cordiness and devotion, respect for his competence, ^{his judgment, his reliability, in all engagements} ~~his~~ stern character - ^{an} adequate man. And that holds true the other way round! ^(not necessary a down road)

7/ The man who leaves the management of the home and the family ~~management~~ entirely to ~~the~~ his wife - and is content with being the food provider - is not fulfilling his true role of husband and father. He is not making his maximum contribution - the contribution, his self, his heart and mind and experience to the cooperation project / home-building. - He is a pay-worker not a parent!

8/ And that is one of the things that wrong with ^{speaks} ~~the~~ man.

He is too busy to be a family-man - In fact the family-man is complementary ^{an} implication. It suggests that it is not man's job to be a family-man - I am not for him about it! or pushing It is not something which is wrong also with some

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"LIKE A MIGHTY ARMY"?

Condensed from the book

Simeon Stylites

LAST SUNDAY our pastor asked Jimmy Mitchell, just back from two years in the army in Korea, if he'd be guest speaker at our church. Jimmy refused at first. Then, with a funny light in his eye, he said he would if the congregation sang "Onward, Christian Soldiers" just before he began. So we gave forth with song, and Jimmy waded in. This is what he said:

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"That might have been all right once. The trouble now is that about ten million men know exactly how

FOR A NUMBER of years Dr. Halford E. Luccock has written a weekly column under the pen name of "Simeon Stylites" for *The Christian Century*. A selection of these columns has now been published by the Oxford University Press. The title of the book is taken from the column here condensed. Until his retirement in 1953 Dr. Luccock was for 25 years Professor of Preaching at Yale Divinity School. He is now kept busy fulfilling preaching and speaking engagements.

an army moves and it doesn't move the way a lot of you folks in our church do. Suppose the army accepted the lame excuses that many of you think are good enough to serve as alibis for not attending church.

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"'Oh,' pipes up a chap by the vacant place, 'Smith was out late last night and needed the sleep. He said he would be with you in spirit.'

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"'Oh,' puts in another chap, 'he's playing golf. He gets only one day a week for recreation, you know.'

"'Sure, sure,' is the sergeant's cheerful answer. 'Hope he has a good game. Where's Robinson?'

"'Robinson,' explains a buddy, 'is sorry not to greet you in person, but he is entertaining guests today. Besides, he was at drill last week.'

"'Thank you,' says the sergeant, smiling. 'Tell him he's welcome any time he is able to drop in.'

"Did any conversation like that ever happen in any army? Don't make me laugh. Yet you hear stuff like that every week in the church, and said with a straight face, too.

"Like a mighty army! If our church really moved like a mighty army, a lot of you folks would be court-martialed!"