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THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS LOYALTY

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The current campaign of opposition to critical scholarship in the realm of religion involves, not merely the question of establishing the truth, but also the question of religious loyalty. Critical scholarship must face this issue. The need and the value of loyalty to the institutions of Christianity on the part of scholars is urged. There is real danger of a scientific provincialism in theological scholarship.

The morale of any cause depends on the whole-souled loyalty of the men and women who are engaged in its promotion. If it be suspected that the cause is being subordinated to other ends by any of its supposed devotees, distrust takes the place of co-operation. If singleness of aim be not restored, the cause itself will suffer from inner division. The disintegrating effect of "disloyalty" was keenly felt by every patriot during the war; and in the effort to prevent this demoralization, stringent restrictions were placed on freedom of criticism. To be sure, the perils of this suppression of criticism were evident to thoughtful minds; and with return to less strenuous days we are eagerly seeking to restore the rights of free speech which were curtailed during the war.

The vigorous campaign which is now being waged against critical scholarship in the realm of religion is to be understood only as we remember that it grows, at least in part, out of a genuine concern for loyalty. Christianity exists as an organized form of devotion to Christ and to the Kingdom of God. Its primary aim is to enlist men in the privileges of religious experience and in the responsibilities of religious service. The morale of the Christian cause depends on whole-souled loyalty. The militant conservatives in Protestantism believe that such loyalty is being impaired by critical scholarship. Hence, in

order to maintain loyalty, they are seeking to penalize and suppress criticism.

This current distrust of critical scholarship cannot be met simply by declaring that the critical scholar has the facts on his side. If the discussion could be kept to the issue of a dispassionate investigation, scholarship would, of course, be able to vindicate itself. But the opponent of criticism addresses himself to an audience which knows little or nothing about the technicalities of critical research. With such an audience it is easy to quote scholars long since dead as doughty defenders of conservative conclusions; or superficially to display disagreements among living scholars as evidences of the inherent vagaries of criticism. The conservative is really challenging the critic on the ground of religious loyalty. Unless scholarship squarely faces this challenge, it can be accused of evading the issue. For the scholar to make rejoinder by charging the conservative with ignorance is peculiarly irritating. It must be granted that a man like Dwight L. Moody knew little or nothing about critical scholarship. Yet he was a great religious leader. The religious man wants to know whether one possessed of critical scholarship can show any such power.

The critical scholar is primarily impressed by the fact that zeal without knowledge is a dangerous thing. If religious loyalty is identified with the acceptance of a theory of the Bible which is contrary to the facts, the discovery of the facts will tend to discredit religion. If Christians be called upon to oppose the doctrine of evolution, the college student who finds that the evolutionary hypothesis, like the theory of gravitation, is taken for granted by scholars, will be ashamed of a religion which puts a premium on avoidable ignorance. The prejudice aroused against religion because it has been identified with doctrines which will not stand the test of critical investigation is real and deep and more widespread than is often suspected. It would be a calamity if there were no critical scholars whose

distinctive contribution is to establish the facts in the realm of religion.

But granting the necessity of establishing the facts, the question raised by the conservative is not yet answered. Does critical investigation, after the facts have been discovered, take expression in religious loyalty? Here there is a distinct danger that critical inquiry may issue in what a modern scholar has called an "illicit secularizing of religion." Religion exists in human life because it is the means of organizing and expressing precious experiences of aspiration, love, devotion, service. Its primary *raison d'être* is the promotion of these experiences. But in the process of critical investigation, the scholar may easily come to use religion exclusively as material to be turned into scientific or critical historical conclusions. What the scholar does may be all to the good so far as disinterested science is concerned. And if the sole end of life were to arrive at defensible scientific conclusions, such a scholar might become the high-priest of a new culture.

But if, either because of sentiments of distrust so freely expressed by those hostile to critical scholarship, or because of exclusive preoccupation with his specialty, the scholar permits himself to drop out of active social relationship with a religious group; if—to be perfectly plain—he ceases to have any vital share in the distinctively religious expressions of experience as these are promoted by our churches, he is almost inevitably led more and more to judge his contribution solely in terms of the scientific standards which are provided by the fellowship of scholarship. That this easy acquiescence in a release from *religious* responsibility is common enough to attract attention, cannot be denied. Not that every scholar thus withdraws himself, any more than every devotee of religious zeal neglects scholarship. But the pressure of professional demands may easily make a scholar provincial, if he neglect the general demands of human culture.

Admirable as is an unquestioning loyalty, there is a kind of loyalty much finer. It may be illustrated in what often takes place in the experience of marriage. The young lover pictures his beloved in terms of perfection. Poetry is full of the ardent devotion inspired by such idealization. Marriage, however, sooner or later brings to light defects of character which were not known. The facts, as these are revealed, do not justify the picture of perfection on which romantic ardor was based. Now some of the finest chapters in human history are the record of a reconstructed loyalty in the marriage relationship. When the facts are frankly faced and taken into account, there may be developed a social companionship which shall include precisely the virtues and the limitations which actually exist. While the unrestrained adoration of the romantic lover is more dramatic, the picture of a domestic love which tenderly observes and reverences frailties as well as virtues is ultimately more satisfying and more enduring. If it were more commonly exalted, we should perhaps have less of the violent ruptures of marriage due to disillusionment.

Another analogy may be drawn from the political realm. Love for country is indispensable to the welfare of our complex social life today. To "stand by the government" is a moral precept which deserves honor. Now no government is perfect. In our land of freedom of speech we have plenty of criticism of governmental policies. It is well that this should be so. But a genuinely patriotic citizen experiences a sense of disappointment if he is compelled to read *merely* criticism. One may acknowledge the brilliancy and the challenge of certain critical journals in the realms of politics and social issues, and yet be profoundly weary of a kind of criticism which leaves the critic and those who agree with him apparently detached from the organizations and institutions which are actually operative. The influence of a critic who is a recognized *outsider* is seriously limited. In times of stress he will be

accused of trying to break down the government instead of trying to help it to be more efficient. But the man who remains in social contact with the organizations through which movements are actually promoted is in a position to have his criticisms listened to with respect, provided he has the exact knowledge which entitles him to respect.

In the history of Israel we have a striking illustration of the combination of inexorable criticism with religious zeal. The reader of the prophetic books of the Old Testament often gasps in amazement at the merciless dissection of national life which the prophets perform. But these very trenchant criticisms are the outgrowth of so ardent a love for Israel that the prophet desires only the best for his nation. And that best can be had only by facing the facts, cost what it may. While the prophets, like all critics, had often to encounter distrust and opposition, yet they became the great religious leaders of their people and the inspirers of all generations since their day. If their exposure of conditions in Israel had taken the form of a coldly judicial investigation, they would today be unknown and forgotten figures.

The critical scholars in the realm of religion today have an enviable opportunity. No permanent objection can be raised to the proposal to test critically all phases of religion. It is inevitable that the outcome of such testing will be the discovery that in theology, as in every other branch of human learning, opinions and doctrines are in need of revision. But, granting this, the scholar should ask himself whether he is primarily interested in religion itself, or merely in critically ascertained facts, regardless of the bearing of his discoveries on the fate of religion. If he is compelled to admit that his only use of religion is to make it serve as material for interesting (and perchance sensationally startling) scientific conclusions, if he assumes no responsibility whatever for the relating of his scholarship to the actual religious life of the churches, he has no real cause for complaint if he is denounced as a foe of religion. Indeed, the comfort and the strength which

religion brings to mankind are so precious and so indispensable to wholesome social relations, that he who neglects this spiritual asset will ultimately find himself outside the great social emotions and motives which most men share. To translate religion into non-religious terms, or to use religion for non-religious purposes cannot be defended even on grounds of scientific precision. Yet this very defect marks some of the most challenging investigations of our day.

On the other hand, the vehement accusations of those who oppose critical scholarship reveal the fact that such scholarship has a far wider hold on the religious thinking of our day than would appear to the casual observer. There are many ministers today who are constructively using scholarship. The great forward movement of the churches recently was based on the preliminary survey undertaken under the auspices of the Interchurch Movement—a survey which sought to arouse loyalty and generosity on the basis of a knowledge of the facts which evangelical and missionary enterprise must face. The time is ripe for a reorganized religious loyalty, which shall include what is made known by critical investigation. There are many brave leaders who are practicing this loyalty. If the scholars themselves shall personally identify themselves actively with the actual social promotion of this kind of religion, the reinforcement which they bring will be invaluable. But a critical scholarship which simply uses religion as material for the filling of scientific treatises must logically look to scientific rather than to religious interests for its support. If the religion of the future is to include the best scholarship it is self-evident that the best scholars must themselves be loyally devoted to religion itself. If the control of religious organization and propaganda should pass into the hands of those opposed to scholarship, the scholars themselves would be largely to blame.

One of the significant aspects of the current attack on critical scholarship is a singular lack of discrimination in relation to the matter of religious loyalty. Although the con-

fessed interest of the reactionary conservatives is the preservation and promotion of religious vitality, they are constantly being betrayed into a mere debate over theological positions. They apparently make little or no distinction between the liberal who has withdrawn from church activities and the liberal who is zealously giving time and thought to the promotion of the church's efficiency. All "critics" are tarred with the same stick. The discussion is being constantly turned into a debate over theological conclusions. Conservative theology is assumed to be identical with religious loyalty. Yet we all know of controversialists, whose theology is strictly orthodox, but who use that theology chiefly as a bludgeon with which to fell possible rivals. Surely this is as serious a misuse of religious material as that of which the critical scholar is alleged to be guilty.

The fact of the matter is that loyalty to the church cannot be determined by asking what a man's theology is. Such loyalty is far more dependent on the spirit of social generosity than on any other one thing. And this spirit of social generosity is precisely what we mean by the spirit of Christ. The ultimate decision as to whether critical scholarship is a blessing or a bane to the church will rest upon the question as to whether such scholarship is or is not fruitful in promoting the spirit of social co-operation. A reconstructed religious loyalty, strong and virile because it faces all the facts, is within reach wherever scholars care enough about religion itself.