

VI

PROVIDENTIALISM

IN the two last lectures we reached the conclusion that those elements in the universe that the purely scientific account failed to explain, taken together with the fact that there can be such a thing as science itself, led to the conclusion that the world is a spiritual system originated and controlled for spiritual ends. The pivot of that argument was found in the moral consciousness of mankind. Every man can formulate it for himself by asking the question, "Is it true that I ought to do the best that I know?" If that is true universally, indeed we may go farther and say that if ever it is true of any one decision of any one man, then the naturalistic theory of the universe breaks up and we must go in quest of some other view that can contain unconditional obligation. There is here, as I have said, an element of moral decision as well as intellectual judgment. I do not know that the rest of these lectures will have much or any meaning at all to anyone who cannot make up his mind on this one crucial point. But if he can make up his mind that there is anything that he is unconditionally bound to do, and will think out a view of the world in harmony with that conviction, I think that he must leave Naturalism behind him and enter a greater world of thought, and, in vague and dim outline at first, perhaps, begin to see the

living God. I have endeavoured, also, to show that that spiritual view of the universe is the only one that can at once include the scientific account and explain those realities and values that escape through the meshes of the net of science. There comes glimmering up also upon the cloudy horizon of our modern perplexities the vision of the world as a moral system: God working out His unchanging purpose through night and day, storm and calm, towards the "one far-off divine event." We turn to our Humanist friends and say, "Why cannot you believe in Him too? Where is the insuperable obstacle?" Apart from the difficulty relating to science which now lies behind us, and that relating to Evil that lies ahead, there is another of a different kind. It is a practical difficulty and, so far as Western Humanism is concerned, is secondary to the other two.

Science, it is believed, has made God superfluous, and the existence of Evil proves Him to be incredible. These two positions are accepted by all the Humanists.

But when we come to the third point there is in Western Humanism a significant difference of opinion. The deeper minds among them frankly admit that the emptying of the heavens, and the vanishing of the hope of immortality is a great human tragedy, and they stoically accept the human situation.

Of this mood Mr Krutch's book on *The Modern Temper* is the best expression. But Mr Huxley and Mr Haydon hold the view that faith in God is not only superfluous or incredible but positively mischievous. Their argument is that belief in God

has the inevitable effect of making men throw on God's Providence the labour for humanity that man ought to take on his own shoulders, and therefore that faith is a kind of dangerous opiate. I shall consider this briefly because it appears only occasionally in the Humanist writers of the West, and, I think, is rather an afterthought than a very serious difficulty. In the Eastern or Russian form of naturalistic Humanism it is, of course, a main position, "Religion is dope. It is the opiate of the peoples." Stated in that strident form the theory goes, of course, clean against far too many of the ascertained facts of the history of religion to be permanently tolerated by open-minded students. In history religion is too often seen as protest and appeal to the sovereign Power over all against the enormities of this present world to make such a general theory tenable. What has Bolshevism, one asks, to make of the Hebrew prophets? Were they dispensers of an opiate of acquiescence in social wrongs? An account of religion which ignores prophecy is obviously too partisan to be scientific. Karl Marx and his Bolshevist disciples, in forming their theories of religion as a whole, were obviously thinking of the socially and politically conservative type of religion with which as revolutionary agitators they had to do. The result when applied to religion generally has been a mere caricature. The element of protest and appeal runs through all religion. It is a cry to God for a better life, not only in the life to come, but in this world as well. That it has been perverted into an opiate in certain periods and regions may be true, for that like all things

human, like science and art for instance, it may be abused, is undoubted. But, as even a passable account of religion, the opiate theory is the merest travesty of the facts. When we turn from Bolshevism to Western Humanism, it is significant that this position is far more rarely and guardedly taken. Indeed, except in Mr Julian Huxley's *Religion Without Revelation*, and Mr Haydon's *Quest of the Ages*, it is hardly expressed at all. But as they lay some emphasis on it, it cannot be ignored. In a passage summing up the advantages of doing away with the idea of a personal God, Mr Huxley says, "The release of God from the anthropomorphic disguise of personality also produces release from another vice which we may term Providentialism. God provides for the sparrow, we are told; how much more for man? And so this beneficent Power will always provide. Divine Providence is an excuse for the poor whom we will have always with us; for the human improvidence which produces whole broods of children without reflection or care as to how they shall live; for not taking action when we are lazy; or, more rarely, for justifying the action we do take when we are energetic. From the point of view of the future destiny of man the present is a time of clash between the idea of Providentialism and the idea of Humanism—human control by human effort in accordance with human ideals. If Providentialism wins, even if it wins only in the domain of the soul and the religious life, humanity is doomed to stagnation, or to destruction, the material and the spiritual side of life being in disharmony."¹

¹ *Religion Without Revelation*, p. 18.

Faith in God's Providence, according to this remarkable passage, is a narcotic for the love of one's kind, and the active labour for their good which ought to follow from it. The whole passage is so remote from reality and so glaringly discordant with the facts of human life that one's interest tends for the moment to pass from the accusation to the accuser. How did he come to believe it? He must surely have been very unfortunate, for one thing, in the Christians he has known whose energy of faith in God's Providence dulled their practical energies of their love for their kind. And I fear that it is only too obvious that in the wide range of his culture he has read very little Christian biography and has a blind eye for Christian history. It takes some hardihood for anyone, in English-speaking lands at least,¹ to maintain that faith in God's Providence deadens the beneficent energies of love. One thinks, to limit one's survey to our fellow countrymen, of Lord Shaftesbury, Florence Nightingale, General Booth, Livingstone, Gordon and a whole host of less conspicuous men and women who have shown amazing persistence of courage and self-sacrifice in the war with poverty, slavery and vice of every kind, and whose biographies disclose unmistakably that their faith in God, instead of dulling their noble energies, created and sustained them. Citations in abundance might be given to prove this from their books, letters and journals.

To anyone who has any reasonable acquaintance

¹ By using that limiting phrase I am not, of course, expressing any doubt that what is true in these lands is true elsewhere, but simply confining our thought to what is most familiar.

with great religious personalities, in all the Christian ages at least, true Christianity instead of being an opiate appears as the most powerful of all sources of enterprise for the good of mankind. Conversely the real doubters and sceptics are not found among such men and women of practical enterprise for human good, but in most cases they are men and women of the study, the "spectators of all time and existence." Those actively engaged in great practical enterprises of danger and sacrifice are temperamentally much more sympathetic to faith than are scholars and thinkers. Goethe has pointed this out somewhere, has asked the reason, and has discovered it in the fact that men of action, intent on the achievement of some great aim, are well aware that the utmost that they can do in the way of prevision cannot nearly cover the field of contingencies, and that the knowledge of this devastating chapter of accidents would paralyse them without intuitive trust. They must believe in something, even though it be only their own star or destiny. Of course this does not prove that that "something" is there, but it does to some extent explain why real faith is not the mother of inaction and acquiescence, but often of titanic energy and amazing endurance.

The truth is that Mr Huxley, in my judgment, has got the picture all wrong, because he greatly under-estimates the magnitude of the task that lies before humanity if it is to survive, and in the end attain even that modified Kingdom of Man for which he and his brother Humanists hope. They are, one and all, generous-minded men, working with a view of the world which is paralysingly

discouraging and dark. We cannot but remember that on the view of Naturalism, whatever victories science may achieve, whatever progress men may make in reason and goodwill, the fundamental human situation is, and always must be, tragic, inasmuch as almighty Nature is regardless of our lot, indifferent to good or evil, and, in a word, on a lower moral plane than we her children. All that scientific and moral progress can ever achieve is at best a lengthening of the chain that binds us all. And when turning from Nature to man who is to conquer Nature and rise above himself, what is he, after all, but the highest of the animal world, with an animal ancestry immeasurably longer than his human period, and a savage pre-history immensely longer than the history of civilisation, and with all that ambiguous heredity working in his blood. Surely there is something defective in the outlook of any man who believes that we shall strengthen the cause of humanitarian progress by destroying faith in the sovereignty and providence of God. Has he really grasped the realities of the situation, measured the forces of evil that are against us, and the pitiful inadequacy of our merely human resources for even the earthly salvation of mankind? He and men like him seem to me to be living in the afterglow of a faith which they have believed themselves compelled to abandon, and seeing the world in hues that cannot last. They are in this typical of the whole age of rationalism, with its sanguine faith in reason and enlightenment and liberty, equality and fraternity, in inevitable "progress," and the spread of education and in an associated world of enduring peace. It

was a great age in many ways, and it achieved great things for human comfort, dignity and happiness, simply because it believed them possible. No enlightened human being wishes to go back to the state of things that existed before it came. But the real trouble was that it did not go deep enough. Men in our day have been again finding out that human beings are more swayed by passion and prejudice than by reason, that scientific knowledge can be appallingly perverted, that progress is by no means inevitable, that a free and democratic Press may be a most powerful means of debasing and corrupting intelligence, and that free institutions may become so corrupt and futile that great modern nations may abandon them for tyrannies in the vain hope of bettering their lot, and that Europe, having seen the vision of world-wide peace plain enough for once to frame the constitution of a League of Nations, should deliberately turn aside and be disobedient to that heavenly vision. It is in a world like this that Mr Huxley wishes men to abandon faith in God lest it should prevent them from doing their best themselves to put things right. The supreme danger of our own time is the want of hope, for nothing great and enduring can ever be achieved in human affairs without hope. It was precisely because the "enlightenment" hoped and believed in man, and in the rationality and beneficence of the universe, that it did such lasting service to mankind. What is supremely needed to-day is the restoration of that hope on a firmer and broader basis than it knew. In mere Nature, as we have seen, there is no such basis. The one possible basis is the reawakening of faith in the

living God, sovereign, just and loving, who has created man in His own image, and made him for life everlasting.

It may be said that the beneficent practical consequences of faith are no valid grounds for believing in God. That is of course true, but the validity of faith is not the point in question. Mr Huxley's argument is that faith in God must have the practical consequence of crippling and even paralysing all human enterprise of social good. I believe that this runs clean counter to normal human experience, and I believe that the reason for that is the simple fact that faith alone can give courage now and always, for the unending struggle for the ever-expanding life of mankind. Naturalism gives no such hope. Mr Lippmann and Mr Krutch see that far more clearly than Mr Huxley, and their stoical view of the human situation corresponds far more intimately to the grim realities of the cosmos, as Naturalism conceives it, than Mr Huxley's modified optimism.

It is certainly one of the strangest of all the features of the present confused situation that in both East and West intelligent human beings should have come to think of Christianity as "an opiate of the peoples," and faith in God's providence as a hindrance to social service of one's kind. No doubt we in the Churches can always say with truth that when men do not wish to retain God in their knowledge, there is nothing that they will not say to excuse their own unbelief. But is it altogether just or safe to content ourselves with that explanation? It was my fortune during the war to address a singular company of youth at

a camp of the Student Christian Movement at Swanwick. They were the men and women who had fled across the Channel from the universities of Belgium before the advancing German armies—spindrift of the great storm. They were a strange medley of races and faiths and unfaiths. Wounded Belgians, British, Russian and Polish Jews, most of them were atheists of the communist type, and as they could not understand the addresses and discussions that were going on in other parts of the camp, they were in a conference tent of their own. In speaking to them about Christ, I had said that to me He was the greatest of all optimists. I saw at once that there was a stir of surprise, and at the close was besieged by protesters. What could I possibly mean? Christianity was essentially a pessimistic view of life. The answer was obvious: Christianity, if it was anything at all, was a religion of faith, hope and love. What did these virtues mean? Faith meant unbounded confidence in God as the sovereign Father of mankind. Hope meant faith in the ultimate victory of the good. Love meant that human beings were worthy of our loyalty and affection. Did they call that a pessimism? There was no answer. I may add that Dr Glover, who was also a speaker, portrayed to them the Jesus of History, as a student of antiquity after much labour on the sources, saw Him. So astonished were they that the bookstall was besieged for copies of the Gospels, and they were seen sitting on the grass all over the park reading them to see if the picture were true. The whole experience was a glimpse deep into the heart of young Europe, and could not but raise the question:

What has the Christian Church been about that such surprising ignorance should prevail as to its message and the true nature of its Lord? Later on I had a long talk with one of the ablest of these students, a Russian. He said to me, "You will be surprised to find so many of my countrymen materialists." I said that I was, that it seemed to me that Materialism was a philosophy congenial to disillusioned middle age rather than to youth. The answer was, "They are one and all revolutionaries. They cannot endure the enormities of the present regime. The revolutionary ideas have come to them in terms of Karl Marx and his followers, and they read no books on the subject that are not in the footnotes of reference in these books." Here again one cannot but ask: What has the Christian Church been doing, either in Britain or in Russia, that such fantastic things should be believed about God and Christ and faith within the sphere of Christendom? Faith in God the foe of practical love! Religion the "opiate of the peoples"! What kind of faith has the Church been showing? What kind of religion has it diffused that such things should be believed by educated youth? Yet for educated men and women in the full tradition of Western civilisation and in possession, as noble literature at least, of the sacred writings, it is hard to make the same excuse as for the young revolutionaries of Eastern Europe. Turn to the facts of history. Is it really the case that a firm faith in God's sovereignty led to quietism and apathy in the cause of human welfare and freedom? I have taken modern instances and confined myself to our own country.

Let us take the broad canvas of European history and take there only one instance out of many. I am not here to hold a brief for Calvinism. Personally I do not hold Calvin's own form of belief in Absolute Predestination. I think it extreme. But just because it is an extreme form of belief in God's sovereign providence I should expect, if there were anything in Mr Huxley's view, to find it confirmed by the history of Calvinism. Now does that story bear out the thesis that faith in God's providence paralyses man's vital energies in the battle for the good, or Marx's theory that "religion is the opiate of the peoples"? It is notorious that it does not. Let the great Calvin memorial in Geneva bear witness. The idea of that colossal monument is that out of the faith of Calvin were born all the free governments of the modern world. Right and left of the austere figure of the Reformer of Geneva are William the Silent of Holland, Coligny of France, John Knox of Scotland, a Pilgrim Father of New England, and Oliver Cromwell—Calvinists all. When we think of such men we do not think of pietistic acquiescence, or of their faiths as "an opiate of the peoples," we think of firm endurance on the very edge of despair against overwhelming odds, and of volcanic activity for the City of God. Let us hear a tribute to Geneva from a gifted and learned Unitarian historian: "So far is Calvinism from producing slackness of will and feebleness of character that Calvinists have been the most strenuous of men." The true Calvinist "feels himself to be an instrument of the Divine Will and bends to whatever toil he undertakes in the unshakable conviction

that he is on the side of God. How copious a spring of moral energy lies in this thought I need not tell you. . . . Calvinism was the form of faith in the strength of which the Dutch Republic was sustained, and the American Republic founded, to propagate which Tyndale gave the English people the Bible in their own tongue and with it his life; which formed the royal intellect of Cromwell and inspired the majestic verse of Milton. Shall I say more, or is not this enough?"

I grant that there is a paradox here. Why should belief in a cosmic dictator have produced democratic institutions and civil freedom? I take it that the reason was that the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries were the age of the Absolute Monarchies, Francis I in France, Charles V and Philip II in Spain; and, in a new phase of the struggle, of the Stuart tyranny in Britain. Everywhere these absolute monarchs set themselves to destroy the Reform and the Puritanism that followed it. Everywhere Calvinism said to these absolute monarchs: "You are all usurpers; only One is absolute, and in His name we defy you all!" Without that faith the battle would have been too hard. There would have been no hope, and hopelessness means paralysis or else individualist stoicism or devout quietism. But from faith in the Divine Sovereignty these men drew inexhaustible courage and endurance. The Ultimate and Absolute Power was on their side, and though they might fall the battle must go on to victory. Their business was to advance His battle-front and win ground for those behind them, and leave the issue to their

¹ Beard's Hibbert Lectures on *The Reformation*, pp. 257 and 261.

Commander. The spirit which thus flamed up in them was one of the most stubborn and formidable activity which wrought itself out not only in the overthrow of the absolute monarchs, but in the creation of the free modern states in the old world, and the pioneering of new lands where the Kingdom of God might be realised.

I do not think that the situation has essentially changed since the days of Calvin. The struggle for the highest life of mankind is always one against great odds, which may well lead the bravest soldiers of the spirit to despair were it not for the assurance of Sovereign Power, Justice and Wisdom over all. Where that faith is rejected men must find something to fill the great void. They instinctively feel their own inadequacy to cope with the powers that are against them. They believe in the intrinsic worth and right of their cause, and derive from that their faith that the nature of things is on their side. Communism itself furnishes an impressive illustration of this. Dialectical Materialism, which is its creed, is a strange hybrid which retains enough of the Hegelian Idealism from which it sprang to believe in an inevitable law of indefinite progress, and from this, which is really quite inconsistent with Materialism, it derives much of its energy and staying power. The theory is the Communist's way of persuading himself that the nature of things is on his side, and, unlike Mr Huxley, he finds it not a narcotic but a stimulant. But none the less, it is a poor substitute for faith in the living God. There is an impressive passage in President Masaryk's *The Making of a State*¹ which I would set alongside Mr Huxley's

¹ Page 316.

singular impeachment of faith in God's providence, the words of a man who has made a nation against the words of a scholar and student. The writer when he wrote them was homeward bound across the Atlantic, and was asking what the Odyssey of the wanderings which had made his nation free had to teach him. It had driven in upon him, he says, the conviction of a great overruling purpose, which had inspired and sustained him, which had sometimes thwarted and overruled him, but never slackened in its control, and which had been over all the warring nations, using them for ends which were higher and wider than theirs. No more interesting human document has come out of the War, for perhaps no man has contributed more to its permanent results or more deeply understood its lessons: "Who at the beginning of the war expected the overthrow of Russia or the establishment of a communist republic? Who foresaw the revolution that came forth from the war and altered the political face of Europe and the whole world? Shakespeare has put it very wisely:

"Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall; and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

Yet a belief that Providence watches over us and the world is no reason for fatalistic inactivity, but rather for optimistic concentration of effort, for a direct injunction to work determinedly for an idea. Only thus are we entitled to expect the so-called lucky accident that springs from the inner logic of life and history, and to trust in God's help."

I would set yet another passage from an older writer beside that disastrous passage from Mr Huxley's volume which I have quoted at the beginning of this lecture, and the assertion that religion is the opiate of the peoples :

“What shall I more say? for the time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and David and Samuel and the prophets ; who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.”