

**OUR NATION'S PERIL:
SOCIAL IDEALS AND
SOCIAL PROGRESS**

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Social Ideals and Social Progress

BY

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THE AMERICAN IDEAL.

"The Fathers who created the Republic . . . grasped not only the whole race of man then living, but they reached forward and seized upon the farthest posterity. They erected a beacon to guide their children and their children's children and the countless myriads who should inhabit the earth in other ages. Wise statesmen as they were, they knew the tendency of prosperity to breed tyrants, and so they established these great self-evident truths, that when in the distant future some man, some faction, some interest, should set up the doctrine that none but rich men, or none but white men, or none but Anglo-Saxon white men were entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, their posterity might look up again to the Declaration of Independence and take courage to renew the battle which their fathers began, so that truth and justice and mercy and all the humane and Christian virtues might not be extinguished from the land: so that no man should thereafter dare to limit or circumscribe the great principles on which the temple of liberty was being built.

"Now, my countrymen, if you have been taught doctrines conflicting with the Declaration of Independence; if you have listened to suggestions which would take away from its grandeur and mutilate the fair symmetry of its proportions, . . . let me entreat you to come back. Return to the fountain whose waters spring close by the blood of the Revolution."—ABRAHAM LINCOLN, Lewiston Speech, August, 1858.

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THE kinship of man to the lower animals is now a generally recognized deduction from the doctrine of evolution. The study of the *genus homo*, and of particular individuals included in the genus, now proceeds with due recognition and use of the comparative method. Not only has this method proved fruitful in the investigation of human anatomy and physiology, and in promoting a correct understanding of the physical attributes of man, it is also likely to be even more profitable in the study of his mental characteristics and his social impulses. We are beginning to see that man is essentially a social being, and that his vision of the world is largely tinged and modified by his past social experiences and those of his gregarious pre-human progenitors.

It is not altogether in the field of analogy, however, that the comparative method is fruitful in anthropological and sociological researches. The differences between man and his poor relations of the lower animal types are quite as interesting and instructive as the likenesses. If reversion to animal traits and conduct throws important light on the problems of criminal anthropology and degeneration in human societies, it is in quite another direction that we must turn for our explanation of those progressive social and individual tendencies which have raised man above the brute creation and inspired him to transform and regenerate himself and his world-environment.

Man, as far as we know, is the only animal capable of creating ideals—of projecting the synthetic imagination into the realm of future possibilities, and of erecting there beacon-lights which will guide and inspire him to higher and ever higher achievements.

He is the only animal that, by the exercise of intelligent volition, can determine his own conduct and direct his own activities to ideal ends. The lower animal types reach stages of statical adaptation to the world-environment beyond which they are never lifted save by the influence of artificial selection, under the direction of human intelligence. Man is the only conscious creature endowed with a nature infinitely progressive in its capabilities; and its chief difference from the nature of the lower animal types lies exactly in this point of its ability to formulate ideals and make them the object of its consecrated aspiration and effort. Living creatures below the human are forced up the scale of being mainly under the stress of physical necessities, by the operation of the law of natural selection, which finds its opportunity in the never-ceasing struggle for existence. While these influences are by no means relaxed in the experience of man, he is also led up the scale of being by the friendly hand of the ideals created by his synthetic imagination.

We should by no means be justified in inferring, however, that man's ideals constitute infallible guides in the improvement of social or individual conditions. They partake of the finiteness and fallibility of his human nature, and are more or less helpful and inspiring as they spring from greater or less degrees of intelligence, correct information, and consecrated moral purpose. It is even possible for these ideals to become wholly aberrant and misleading, and to promote social and individual degeneration, instead of progress. The study of these ideals, and of the conditions under which they are created and become dominant factors in the lives of men and of societies, is therefore of the highest import to the student of social conditions, as well as to the statesman, moral reformer and religious teacher. It is to this study, and to some of the practical conclusions that seem to flow from it, that this paper would invite attention.

As it relates to the individual life and character, the principle involved in our thesis is clearly recognized in the prescient saying: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." Everywhere the founder of Christianity emphasizes the inner nature and purpose of the heart, rather than the outward act, as the criterion of character. While this is none the less strongly emphasized by the scientific psychology and sociology of the present day, they also affirm the importance of studying the motive, or ideal, in the light of its eventuation in the act and its consequences, in

order to correct the aberrations due to human ignorance and fallibility. In our relations to our fellow-men and to society, we are justly held responsible, not merely for sincerity of purpose and the consecration of will and effort towards its attainment, but also for an intelligent understanding of the results which necessarily flow from the courses of action which we are thus impelled to undertake.

It is not to the individual but to the social implications of the principle that I wish here especially to call attention. A brief reference to some of the wider and more general illustrations of the influence of social ideals on the trend of civilization and racial development may help to clear the way for a closer and more practical application of our thesis to the problems immediately before us for solution. Whatever may be our individual estimate of the nature of religion and the utility of religious beliefs, no thoughtful student of history can fail to recognize the potent influence of religious ideals in determining the destinies of the race. It is in the broader attitude of religion toward life, rather than in its special dogmas or ritual observances, that this influence is chiefly felt in moulding the character of social institutions.

The Oriental religions are generally pessimistic in their attitude toward the life that now is. Tacitly or implicitly, they assume that suffering and evil are such dominant and all-pervading factors in the very nature of a phenomenal existence that the only rational ideal for human aspiration is the attainment of a state which transcends the phenomenal, and in which supreme bliss is reached by the renunciation of all which makes life in this phenomenal world. This life, the orthodox Hindu says, is *Māya*—real enough indeed as a fact of present experience, full of ignorance with its resulting pains and sorrows, but owing its reality in our consciousness to the fact that somehow the soul has become entangled in the mesh of material things, and is thereby blinded to its true nature. This veil of illusion can only be torn away by the attainment of a super-conscious state in which all sense of "I" and "Thou," of a subjective world of mind and an objective world of matter, alike transitory and phenomenal, is utterly transcended. Brahminism, therefore, largely gives itself up to meditation and introspection, pays little heed to the improvement of material conditions, neglects or mortifies the flesh by ascetic observances, regards the celibate life as more holy than

that of wedlock, pays so little attention to statesmanship and the science of government that its social organism never rises out of the feudal condition until it has fallen a prey to one foreign invader after another, finally achieving its nearest approach to political unity and a common feeling of nationality under English rule. The development of the Caste system in India is the result of an attempt to avoid the stress of competition by the rigid segregation of industries and occupations, rather than by seeking a higher solution of the industrial problem through rational thought, persistent effort, and a normal process of unhampered evolution.

Buddhism was in some respects a natural reaction against the inertia and extreme bent toward introspection and metaphysical speculation illustrated in Brahminism, but it also is profoundly pessimistic as regards the present life. It views this earthly existence as a transitory process, full of pain and misery. It denies a permanent soul entity, and is silent as to the existence of a permanent Being behind the never-ceasing round of phenomenal change. Its Nirvāna, whether or not it implies absolute non-existence, is an escape from the consciousness of temporal conditions and the succession of re-incarnations, into a state so wholly different as to be indescribable in language, and only to be apprehended through experience. Buddhism, transplanted from its native soil, has doubtless largely misunderstood and misinterpreted the thought of its founder. Though on the whole it has given an ethical uplift to the nations where it has taken root, it has often been overgrown with superstitions, and has not been able to throw off the incubus of pessimism which was its inheritance.

Zoroastrianism and Judaism, in their earlier developed forms, though scarcely less pessimistic as regards the present conditions of earthly existence, are less mystical and metaphysical, and more objective in their visions of the future life. Both dream, as did the early Christian, of a regenerated earth, purified by fire, and inhabited by a race purged of sin and endowed with immortality. Here we have no vision of a state superconscious and indescribable, but of a world of conscious existence in a redeemed society, as a boon to the righteous. The greater objectivity of this ideal, and the hope for ultimate happiness on a regenerated earth, has doubtless been a large factor in maintaining the wonderful vitality of the Jew in spite of expatriation and persecution, and in preserving

the qualities of enterprise and commercial success both in the Jew and in the Parsi.

In the more invigorating atmosphere of Occidental life, the conception of the present state of existence has never been wholly pessimistic. The Greek and Roman rejoiced in bodily strength and beauty, and found enjoyment in conflict with the foe and the contest with the forces and inertia of the physical world. Even their barbaric games, the fierce contests of the arena, testify to a delight in life and in the exercise of the bodily powers which we do not find in the developed thought of the Orient. Plato, who voiced the highest thought of the Greek, described in his "Republic" his conception of an ideal earthly society. Aristotle also draws his picture of the perfect social state. Though neither Plato nor Aristotle dreamed of lifting the slave into citizenship, or of assuring to all an equality of social or industrial opportunity, the visions of both were hopeful of future possibilities in an earthly society, and were incentives to effort toward their realization. Both the Greek and the Roman, however, laid stress on custom, legislation and governmental authority as the means of social regeneration, rather than upon education and the transformation of individual character; and the political structures of both were ultimately wrecked on the rocks of imperialism and the supremacy of military power.

Christianity, mingling its primitive ethical and eschatological conceptions with the prevalent Pagan ideas, has at once held up the vision of an objective heaven, wherein the associations and some of the activities of the earthly life will be continued, and enforced the obligation of transforming human society, so as to build up the Kingdom of God on the earth. Adapting itself to varying racial and political conditions as none of the older religions were able to do, it has nowhere left a pure and unadulterated bequest of institutions inspired by the ideals of its founder. Its influence can only be traced as modified by local environments, and more or less distorted by varying racial and philosophical tendencies. The dominant ideals in the modern Christian and civilized world are rather national and local than ethical and universal. The love of individual liberty which characterizes the Teutonic peoples, conjoined to racial self-confidence, industrial and commercial enterprise seeking world-conquest for its opportunities, mingled with a poorly concealed contempt for weaker races, is modified by the local circumstances