

The Trend Away From Religious Dogma

THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE in the intellectual life of the United States is the apparent shift from Biblical authority and religious sanctions to scientific and factual authority and sanctions.

It seems possible, indeed, that a new religion may develop—a religion as different from traditional Christianity as Christianity is from Judaism.

So, at any rate, Prof. Hornell Hart, of Bryn Mawr College, reads the signs. He is one of the big company who participated in the national survey of social trends initiated by President Hoover in 1929. The results of that survey are now published by McGraw-Hill under the title, "Recent Social Trends in the United States."

Two other investigators find evidence of a decline in dogma and a rise in the "social gospel" as evidence of the humanist form of religion which Professor Hart sees foreshadowed by the morning sun.

Yet, at the same time, these authors say that present-day religion has a lot of stability, and that more money is being spent in keeping the churches alive than ever before. But to-day's institutional religion appears to have more to do with the "social gospel" than with the old-time forms of piety and worship.

While "traditional Christianity has been sinking to a new low point in public interest and esteem as expressed in magazines," deeper interest is manifested in what Professor Hart terms "the rise of 'open-minded religion,'" in which the avowed goals are "fulfilment of personality, the attainment of rich experience, and the achievement of basic values here on earth."

The conclusions of Professor Hart are "based almost entirely upon statistical analyses of interests and opinions expressed in leading general magazines, supplemented by analyses of certain books and newspaper indexes." Much of the data was collected by William B. Mills, a Protestant, and Francis L. McGarraghy, a Roman Catholic.

TRADITIONALISTS of all faiths will be startled to hear this mass of evidence that the ancient creed is dissolving in doubt.

Taken at their face value, the findings show that the Decalog as a whole is no longer authoritative. Lying, stealing, and murder are still unfashionable, but virtue, it seems, is no longer essential.

"The reliability of the results," says Professor Hart, "is indicated by the fact that the same general trends in discussion and opinion appear in a number of independent sources at the same time. The weakened grip of traditional Christianity upon educated opinion in the United States has been found reflected in general 'intellectual' periodicals, in scholarly journals, in the number of religious books published, in declining relative circulations of religious journals, and in the attitudes reflected in mass circulation magazines. Evidence of the recent rebellion against authoritative monogamistic mores," we are told, "has been found not only in magazine articles, but in short stories, moving pictures, and stage plays."

In the field of sex relations Professor Hart summarizes his findings, in part, as follows:

LITERARY
DIGEST

JANUARY 21,

1933

p.17

RELIGION

"Toleration of extra-marital sex relations by the general public, as reflected in short stories, moving pictures and plays, has lately been several times as great as it was in 1900.

"The women's periodicals gave far more attention and toleration to breaches of the sexual morality code in 1931-32 than the magazines of 1900-05. More attention and more toleration were given by the mass circulation magazines of 1931-32. Much more attention and still more toleration or approval were given by the 'intellectual' magazines of 1931-32. More interested still, but avowedly most opposed to extra-marital relations, were the sensational periodicals.

"Moving-pictures were more apt than any class of magazines studied to present divorce and sexual irregularities in an approving light.

"The waning power of religious sanctions is closely related with the recent rise of antagonism against monogamistic sex mores."

In discussing these trends, Professor Hart asserts:

"Changes in sex attitudes have probably been connected to some extent with technological developments, such as the introduction of the automobile and the dissemination of birth-control devices; with the results of industrial development such as the growth of cities; with the transfer of functions from the home to the factory; and with the disintegration of patriarchal family conceptions. . . .

"The evidence, however, suggests to the investigator that a major factor in recent shifts of attitudes toward sex behavior has been the breakdown of traditional religious control and partially worked-out attempts to substitute scientific criteria."

Among the other trends observed by Professor Hart is the "antagonistic criticism of the Church, of ministers, and of traditional creeds," which "reached a maximum in 1925-1928 in general magazines, and still exceeds the volume of favorable comment." We learn further:

"The leading part in antagonistic criticism has been taken by the periodicals circulating among the more highly educated part of the population; periodicals read by the great masses of the people reflect a growing lack of interest in rather than aggressive criticism of religion. Favorable discussions of God, or religion in relation to science and of the spiritual life, reached a new high peak in 1925-1928. Analysis of short stories suggests that even this type of religion has definitely less grip on the public in 1932 than it had in 1900-1905."

Regarding the use of liquor, Professor Hart says that "religious sanctions have played a decreasing part in Prohibition discussion. In 1914 church activity in the dry cause was approved twice as frequently as it was condemned; in 1926, 1929, and 1931 it was criticized more frequently than it was approved."

While the influence of creed is apparently declining, it is shown by Prof. C. Luther Fry and Mary Frost Jessup that a high degree of stability and permanence characterize institutional religion. "People may not be attending their churches as regularly as they once did, but they are supporting them on a scale never known before."

The rising interest since 1908 in the "social gospel" is indicated by the pronouncements by the churches on this subject, which have become increasingly inclusive. They embrace "international affairs, social justice, racial problems, the family, education, and almost every imaginable phase in the development of the individual and society."

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