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The Sociological Background

Nowadays most of the discussions about the truth and validity of Christianity in particular and religious attitudes in general takes place in colleges and universities and in the various milieux inhabited by relatively educated and cultured people. Books on the subject, for obvious reasons, are written by the sort of people who write books on serious subjects and are read by the relatively small public which is addicted to the study of serious subjects. This gives the impression that the contemporary dilemma of the Christian Church is primarily an intellectual one, whereas in fact the Church’s problem is basically a social problem.

“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” cries the Psalmist in anguish. Probably in all its history the Christian Church has never been confronted by a stranger, that is by a more estranged, land in which to sing the Lord’s song than our present commercial and industrial culture. Its relationship to the Christian faith, and indeed to religion in general, is a sociological question rather than an intellectual problem. Even in those relatively small areas of our culture in which the problem is diagnosed and experienced as an intellectual one, for example among contemporary university students, the unbelievers are rationalizing inherited social attitudes rather than solving intellectual problems in the detached philosophical manner.
For the eighteenth century not only produced a characteristically secular and irreligious attitude among its intellectual élite, it also produced a public and a culture pattern which was destined, without understanding it, to espouse it and make it its own. The eighteenth century was not only the century of the rationalistic "enlightenment" in the special sense which we discussed in the last chapter, but it was also the century which saw the beginning of the industrial revolution and the creation of the modern working class.

It was this class that became the great mass irreligious class, and it is from this class, owing to its much higher birth rates, that even the majority of our twentieth-century élite and educated classes are descended.

Perhaps the greatest error of historical perspective of which the rationalists and secularists of the nineteenth century were guilty was the belief that irreligion is the by-product of education, that where religion still lingers it does so among the relatively undereducated and less intelligent sections of the community. I well remember from my own boyhood during the First World War and the following decade that in a body like the Rationalist Press Association, in whose narrow tenets I was brought up, this conviction was accepted as a kind of basic dogma of the unfaith. All religion is crude superstition and its disappearance is the inevitable result of education. The same kind of conviction, at all events until very recently, seems to have sustained the optimism of the violent and dogmatic anti-religious forces in Russia. But all the time it was obvious, or should have been to any unprejudiced eye, that the great mass support of the irreligious way of life was characteristic of the least educated elements in society. Of course such people did not write the anti-religious books, but then most of their irreligious people did not read the anti-religious books, and would not have understood them if they had. I think it is quite possible
that people of definite religious commitment read the anti-religious books to a far greater extent than those who practise the irreligious way of life, for they are anxious to understand the irreligious attitude and to detect the fallacies underlying it. In contemporary Church circles professors, both of the sciences and the humanities, writers and artists, are quite commonly encountered, but it is much more difficult to meet a lorry driver or a factory worker.

No doubt the mistake is partly that of being too easily convinced by myths of our own making, of being more influenced by our dogmas than by our observations, but perhaps the huge extent of the error—it has been accepted almost without question from the eighteenth century to the present day—is partly due to the fact that there had been a time when something like it seemed to be true. In the days when society was basically rural and traditional, the culture pattern of the least educated people did include religious habits and observances. No doubt there are parts of the world where this state of things still obtains, for example the large fundamentalist area in the South of the United States and perhaps among Irish peasantry. On the whole, however, rural society persisting as a minority element in an urban culture is a very different thing from past societies in which the rural element was the majority element. Minority rural pockets in urban society tend to be enormously influenced by the predominant urban culture and to content themselves with producing a rather feeble rural imitation of it. Thus, in England to-day the rural minority is quite as irreligious as the urban majority, perhaps indeed even more so. The living culture of the rural areas is little more than a feeble reflection of the predominating urban culture.

What we have to understand, then, is precisely how and why the irreligious culture pattern of the urban industrial workers arose and how it perpetuated and spread itself. It is,
of course, irreligious rather than anti-religious. It is a culture pattern that contains no particular religious elements, not even a tradition of zealous, missionary-hearted irreligious conviction. On the other hand it tends to be rather apathetically tolerant of anti-religious propaganda and public policies inspired by secularistic prejudices and aims, so that it easily lends itself to leadership by anti-religious men.

When the industrial revolution first prompted the migration of rural workers in considerable numbers to the new industrial towns, the eighteenth-century Church was in a depressed and inactive state. For several generations little or no provision was made for the traditional religious needs of these new concentrations of population. The result was the emergence of a new culture pattern that included no elements of pastoral supervision or religious practice. By the time the nineteenth-century Church woke up to what was happening this culture pattern was already well established. As Professor Inglis has clearly shown in his important book, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, energetic efforts were made during the nineteenth century to reclaim the urban workers for the Church, but they all ended in comparative failure. No doubt, most of the blame must be laid at the door of the unpleasant and indeed un-evangelical character of nineteenth-century *bourgeois* evangelical religion. Indeed the nineteenth-century *bourgeoisie* could hardly expect to exploit the proletariat at one moment and successfully preach the Gospel to it at the next. This is, above all, the age in which it could be plausibly supposed that religious commitment and observance is a characteristically *bourgeois* attitude and activity. This was the time when religion became a part of the *bourgeois* culture pattern just as much as irreligion was the characteristic form of the proletarian culture pattern.

Nowadays all this is changed, although many people have yet to realize it. Bourgeois society has passed away and we have emerged into the day of a new managerial and technological society in which the predominant elements that supply social and economic leadership are no longer bourgeois property owners but a new race of men endowed with technological and administrative organizational skills that command a relatively high income. But where do these new people come from? To some extent no doubt they are descended from the old nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, but not to a very great extent. For at the time, the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the demand for new men of this kind began to be felt, bourgeois birth rates were comparatively low, and the new men had to be recruited from among the brighter children of the proletariat. In Europe and even more in America a completely new system of popular education had to be designed for this very purpose. The result is that the predominant culture pattern of the new middle classes resembles much more closely the culture pattern of the old proletariat than that of the old bourgeoisie. Modern life to an overwhelming extent is affluent working class life. The affluence makes it much more comfortable, and much more successful in achieving its social objectives, but it does not very profoundly transform its character.

Perhaps the most interesting example of the extent to which this is true is the way in which the working class elements that have now made their breakthrough into the higher education tend to employ their new intellectual skills to devise an ideology or rationalization of their inherited proletarian culture pattern. For this purpose they appeal to the outlook characteristic of the eighteenth-century enlightenment, providing it with some new twist that makes it seem contemporary, as in the various forms of scientific positivism. The original proletarians were merely non-
religious. Their educated and cultured descendants fill this vacancy with some form of dogmatic irreligion. Thus the characteristic proletarian culture pattern is able to triumph, at least in appearance, without any assistance from communism or Marxism, even in countries like the United States that sincerely regard themselves as firmly anti-communist.

Thus the great vogue of secular and anti-religious movements in the modern world, supported as they are without any real sympathy or understanding by the mere apathetic irreligiosity of the great mass of the modern proletariat, provides an example of what the great historian of classical culture, Rostovtzeff, termed “the proletarianization of society”, the constant tendency of cultures to conform to the culture patterns of their least educated members, because it is from such sources that they are continually compelled to recruit their new élite. Such a new élite tends to bring with it its own culture pattern, and to use its new intellectual skills to devise or improvise a defence and justification of its characteristic blindness and ineptitude.

But if such a proletarianization of culture is an old and familiar phenomenon, it is probably true that never before have we witnessed and experienced it operating on so vast a scale as during the last two hundred years. The Christian Church has paid dearly for the eighteenth-century failure to evangelize the new working masses. In the nineteenth century, men of vision, like the great Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice, clearly perceived that the new working classes were the great challenge to the Church, and that the failure to contain them within the Church would have tragic consequences indeed.

Oddly enough the élite anti-religious writers and propagandists remained just as blind to what was happening as

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the religious leaders. They both of them ignored the immense potentiality of the working class. The former continued the myth that it was education and progress that were destroying faith, while the latter went on believing that if only they could hold on to the *bourgeois* leaders of society all would ultimately be well. Both were equally blind to what was really happening.

Now, however, it is becoming obvious that we are on the eve of changes that will entirely alter the situation confronting us. Neither the old *bourgeois* religiosity nor the newer proletarian irreligiosity, which is by now quite old in its turn, will count for very much in the future that is advancing upon us. The gulf between *bourgeois* and proletariat was created by the industrial revolution, with its vast application of mechanical devices to industrial production and its invention of that temple of productivity, the factory. Now we are on the eve of something strangely like the industrial revolution, and yet strangely unlike it, the revolution by automation, which may well banish from society both the *bourgeoisie* and the proletariat and substitute for that stark confrontation new social tensions on the one hand and new historical possibilities on the other. But this is a theme that calls for another chapter.