Some Tendencies of American Life

Many Dangers Assail Our Civilization Unless Checked

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The topic, tendencies of American life, has in it a suggestion of prophecy; yet I shall try to avoid the role of the prophet. I am not going to tell you of any things that will certainly happen to our country. Rather I wish to utter some convictions about the possibility that certain things may happen unless we are able by checking some present tendencies to avoid their probable results. I am temperamentally an optimist; but one may be an optimist about life in the long run while quite the reverse with reference to particular situations.

We hardly need to remind ourselves of the great gain of our civilization in some directions. No people in the world was ever so comfortable. Our telephones, airplanes, motor cars, radio, and labor-saving machines have made living pleasant and easy—at least for a few of us. We have annihilated time and space in a certain sense at least, and have brought the ends of the earth together. Never was the communication of thought easier. Whether we are producing greater thoughts for communication than formerly is not so certain.

A distinguished student of the ancient Maya civilization, Mr. Edward Thompson, of Yucatan, was recently asked why this wonderful civilization declined and disappeared. After speaking of the probabilities of droughts and the prohibitory high costs of living which developed among the Mayas, he went on to say that he was a believer in the theory of national as well as individual cycles of life, of growth and decay, thus avowing himself to be of the school of Oswald Spengler. Do similar dangers threaten our modern western world? The danger of a wide spread drought and famine is much more remote, we may say with some confidence; for although our forebears and some of our contemporaries have been doing their best to denude the soil of the vast tracts of forests which help to retain the moisture so necessary to life, still we may possibly have learned our lesson in time to avert disaster in this direction. The cost of living may and doubtless will considerably advance, as it has already begun to do; again, we may say that our chances of being able to offset this tendency by the discovery of new foods and the invention of synthetic foods are vastly superior to those of any other people that has preceded us on the earth. For example, Dr. Robert Morris is sure of the vast possibilities of nuts as a practically new source of food. Our chemists have made remarkable advances in their knowledge of food composition and values; whether they will be able, when required, to produce synthetic beefsteak and milk is not yet certain, but they have accomplished feats perhaps quite as wonderful.

How, then, about the national cycle and its approaching end? I doubt if enough data are in for us to answer this question satisfactorily. We may know something about the life cycle of the individual animal; we know little enough about man's life or the conditions which bring his life to a close. We have of late considerably increased the span of human life in the temperate zone and we have apparently not reached the limits of possibility in this direction. Why should not man live to be a hundred years old on the average? By finding out and correcting its mistakes in time, why should not a nation prolong its life indefinitely? We can only say in reply that if such a thing be possible, though it has never yet been done, we can set our specialists at work to discover the facts and the remedies; and yet the problem of inducing the people to carry out instructions will still remain.

These are not, however, the main observations that I would present to you. For I am not so much concerned with our physical and material longevity as with our mental, moral, and spiritual health; for good health is indispensable.
for long life. Out of the heart are the issues of life. So I shall discuss the future of America with reference to the home, the school, the church, and our international relations.

The American home, so often called the bulwark of our civilization, has of late been menaced by the divorce mill. The number of marriages per 1,000 of population decreased from 10.30 in 1925 to 10.26 in 1926; the number of divorces increased from 1.52 to 1.54. One marriage in seven now contracted results in divorce!

The reaction of these broken homes is hard enough on the disillusioned parties to the divorce. It is infinitely harder on the children, many of whom, unwisely reared or allowed to grow up without training or discipline, develop into anything but good citizens. The authorities of one reputable preparatory school have seriously considered the consistent rejection of all candidates for admission from broken homes. It is easy to say that two foolish parents would probably not bring up a child much more wisely than would one such parent, still, between the two the child is apt to get at least some accidental discipline and as Margaret Mead points out (The Nation, Feb. 27, 1929) the home, though it may not be a happy one, does afford some measure of economic security.

UNLESS the sanctity of the home be preserved, I see no future ahead for the ancient and honorable institution of marriage. It will degenerate into a mere farce. Already it has become for some persons an empty legality. A mere farce. It will degenerate into a marriage. It will degenerate into a divorce. It is infinitely hard enough on the disillusioned divorces! The law should not yet be withdrawn from them as a class. Finally, uniform divorce laws are much to be desired. Until Reno stiffens up, the struggle for decent divorce legislation will continue to be difficult.

The world, however, is not yet ready to discard this basic security of the home.

Few unbiased students of family welfare today would do away with divorce. Some, it is true, would write on the walls of the marriage scene, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." Divorce gives welcome relief to many honorable persons from the results of too serious matrimonial errors. But it should not be made too easy. On such matters I hate to oppose so learned an expert as Mr. Havelock Ellis or more recent writers in The Nation (Feb. 27, March 20, April 10, 1929); but since human nature is what it is the evils resulting from unrestricted divorce could, in my opinion be well nigh intolerable. If my view is sound, the number of grounds on which divorce can legally be secured should be reduced to a minimum—let us say, non-support, extreme cruelty, and infidelity. The lusty brute who divorces one good woman simply in order that he may marry a new flame is a disgrace to civilized society. Divorces are all too easy for such persons to obtain. From this point of view the plea of Joseph Pollard for the abolition of alimony, even for the gold-digger, seems somewhat premature. The fact is that women have not yet reached the point of economic and industrial independence; and the protection of the law should not yet be withdrawn from them as a class. Finally, uniform divorce laws are much to be desired. Until Reno stiffens up, the struggle for decent divorce legislation will continue to be difficult.

HUSBANDS far we have considered the matter only negatively. How to prevent the troubled home from going upon the rocks is indeed a problem. But it will become a less serious one if we can inculcate in the minds of our youth positive notions of the value and meaning of home in our social life. Many factors enter into the discussion: the cost of the home, the distractions of popular entertainments outside, the annual or semi-annual migrations to summer or winter resorts, living in apartment houses or hotels, and so on. The modern home is much less secluded than was formerly the case, and is much less a haven of refuge for the tired worker. As a result the home environment means far less than it once did. Since the former conditions cannot be completely restored, we must make an effort to preserve as satisfactory conditions as possible in our present situation. Much can still be done to give to each member of the family the home environments and conditions which are best for him or her. Probably the thing which will contribute most to the happiness of all is for everybody, so far as in him lies, to preserve an even temper. This is not the triviality it may seem to be. The atmosphere of wrangling is one to get away from. Moreover, the home which is the scene of order and good taste keeps longest its hold upon its inmates.

No substitute for the home has ever found much favor. If children are brought into the world, the parents owe it to their children to provide them with the right sort of environment. And this includes something more than an attic bed, three meals a day, clothing, and a certain number of months schooling. The success of wise judges in inducing quarrelsome parents to compose their differences for the sake of their children indicates what can be done on a large scale. The prerequisite is that all the persons concerned shall be made fully conscious of their responsibilities which they have no right to shift except under extreme provocation. The high ecclesiastical view of marriage as a holy sacrament may not be acceptable today to all; but the sum total of human happiness will be increased, I am convinced, if we treat the marriage vow as the most sacred of obligations.

PASS to a consideration of the American school. If care on the part of school authorities can make our schools and colleges good ones, they ought to be of the first class. For never, it would seem, have school superintendents, principals, and boards of education been more active or efficient than they are today. Research upon all sorts of administrative problems in education is being everywhere vigorously pushed.

The problem of good schools is not at all simplified by the recent rapid and large increase in the numbers of high school and college pupils. Since the war the figures have shot up with astonishing rapidity. Many cities have failed to keep pace with the demand, the result being too many part-time scholars and too constant overcrowding of classrooms. The thronging of our school and college halls with students, in spite of its attendant difficulties, is one of the most encouraging signs of the times. I care not how ignoble or superficial the motive of a boy or girl may be in going through school or college; there is bound to be some gain from the experience. I have very little patience with the view that education is to be only for the leaders, and that a great many of the new
arrivals in college are incapable of being educated. Incapable they may be of undergoing education of a certain sort (in which they have no real interest) or beyond a certain degree or stage of progress; but I doubt if with our present crude and unsatisfactory modes of measurement and our often superficial and misleading mental tests, we can yet be sure what that stage is, beyond which they can never pass. Let every boy and girl have the opportunity for education up to the limit of their capacity, and let us always give them the benefit of the doubt.

What is it to be educated? The question has been asked many times; it will continue to be asked many times even after I have here offered a perfectly good present-day answer. For the needs as well as the possibilities of the human soul are infinite. The educational ideals of one age and country are far from being those of another.

Education, it seems to me, involves two processes: first, the acquisition and assimilation of learning, or ideas and views of the world; or, as some call them, facts; and secondly whetting or disciplining of the mind by pondering upon these ideas, detecting relationships and connections, and making up one’s mind what one believes. As Doctor Newman long ago pointed out, the first of these processes is especially characteristic of the earlier years of our mental life, in which we become used to the world; while the second should be, though it not infrequently fails to be, characteristic of our mature years. The possession of some ideas or information and the ability to think about ideas: these are the marks of the educated man. Since our ideas may and should exert a sort of leavening and quickening influence on our lives, a good deal depends on what ideas we receive and from whom we receive them. If we sit at the feet of a strong conservative we get the notion that the ways of the fathers were all good, and that all change is dangerous. Likewise, the radical teacher inculcates in us the notion that the danger lies rather in social stagnation, in too blindly following in the footsteps of the fathers.

Perhaps a chief fault of our education has ever been that we have veered too much to the conservative side.

We have leaned a little too much on tradition and a little too little on science. We have gone to our ancestors, who knew far less about the world than we ourselves know, and have expected to receive from them sound answers to the question how to live—forgetful of the fact that we cannot learn how to live until we know something more about ourselves and the people we have got to live with, and about the world, the scene in which we must live. From this point of view some of us are still groping in the middle ages, when all was tradition.

Why do we shun or suspect the scientist? Partly, I suppose, through a traditional or inherited distrust of knowledge which comes to us through the medium of the senses, and which has so repeatedly turned out to be only an untestable hypothesis; as for example, the view that the earth was the center of our universe. But it is also partly due to our mistaken notion that we can be sure of knowledge which has acquired good standing from a long period of acceptance; as Aristotle’s views of science in the middle ages.

Yet the scientist is our best friend, and furnishes the only support on which we can confidently lean for much of our knowledge. For when the reputable scientist does not know, he tells us so. And in spite of the fact that he has reaped from one hypothesis after another ever since the dawn of scientific research, still he is now able to present to us a connected story of the origin and development of the world which the upholster of tradition has nothing to match. And this new view of the world, rightly understood, is in no way subversive of religion, and in no way undertakes the ethical duty which the purest religion inculcates.

I wish to plead, therefore, for teaching in our schools which shall square with the findings of the scientist. In the end it is the only safe way. The history of scientific discovery is a consistent record of the triumph of the scientist over their opponents. Perhaps the most pathetic spectacle in all recorded history is the forcing of Galileo to retract his belief that the earth went round the sun. But the pathos of one weak man compelled to utter error with his lips is as nothing to the pathos of a great institution, the Christian church, which should be the intellectual as well as the spiritual leader of the world, lending its support to ignorance and prejudice. The priests of the Delphic oracle learned wisdom from experience. The church today would have a more secure place in the hearts of the intellectually-minded if it could learn to distinguish between the truths which may be subjectively apprehended, and on which the mystic speaks with some authority and those truths which are learned only through the objective approach to life. We may grant the validity of the message when the mystic hears the still small voice of God speaking to the soul; but when we wish to learn about the age of man on the earth we must go to the caves of the East and study objectively the remains of early man which we find there.

Let me quote from one of the greatest of living biologists, Dr. David Starr Jordan:

“Science alone can form a sound basis for the conduct of life. The art of living, or ethics, can fall back on no final authority. That is right which in the long run justifies itself in more abundant life. In such matters neither man nor nation can trust to impulse or to instincts, for to control these and to discriminate among them is a function of the intelligence. Conscience, even though backed by a will to do right, needs training and instruction. The grossest brutalities that stain the pages of history have been perpetuated by men with a perfectly clear conscience, though not an enlightened one. In the conduct of life we cannot trust religion (this from a deeply religious man), for the sentiment of fear, awe, reverence, and duty, from which it evolves is likely to be sadly mangled or overlaid by superstition. Truth is always in some degree perverted by uniformed tradition or by systematic organization. It is for science to dissolve superstition and to disentangle religion from the confusing meshes of authority.”

Unrestricted, absolute freedom of teaching: this is an indispensable condition for the best work of both teacher and pupil. There will doubtless be a small number of instances in which teachers will abuse the privilege. There are ways of handling such cases individually with justice to all, without hamstrung the work of all teachers. In the long run the
principle of freedom of teaching is safer and less productive of vicious consequences. Anti-evolution laws invariably defeat their own ends by introducing the bogeyman of the objectionable doctrines. The curiosity of the younger persons is widely aroused and a distorted sense of values inevitably results. Compulsory Bible-reading laws and laws forbidding the reading of the Bible in the schools are equally objectionable. If this is a Christian nation, and we hope it will continue to be, it will be so because the spirit of the people is that of the Man of Nazareth rather than because of any laws on the statute books. And it ought to be pretty obvious that certain types of laws will re-act against popular acceptance of Christianity.

Another regrettable phase of our present day education is our lack of good teachers. Young men and women who might make teachers of the first order are either repelled by the red tape of the pedantic administration or lured away to other more lucrative professions. An excellent teacher, a former pupil of mine, was forced to give up teaching for secretarial work because her nerves could not stand the strain of having to put certain high percentage of her students through the New York regents' examinations. Law, medicine, engineering and business today absorb the bulk of our collegiate product. The result is that there are not nearly enough teachers to go round, either for our schools or for our colleges. Inferior teaching, to be sure, may be better than none, if it prove not to be dangerous. But it is a sad waste of the taxpayer's money to spend it on poor teaching when the added investment of a little more money would make all the difference between poor teaching and good. For there would seem to be no question that some potentially excellent teachers are now to be found in other kinds of work. The educational world cannot afford to lose their services. A fairly paid teaching staff free from financial worries, is a fundamental prerequisite to first class efficiency in school and college.

We pass to some consideration of the church in modern life. The situation is not one to arouse hope. It certainly cannot be maintained that the church is growing so as to satisfy even the most modest desires of its supporters. In some parts of our country the church may be gaining substantially; in others, despite free lunches and dancing it is barely holding its own, or slightly better.

What is the cause of the decline? It is easy to reply, the encroachment of the kingdom of Satan; but such an answer will scarcely satisfy all of us. One reason doubtless is, that the feeling of the need of the church in society is possibly diminishing because of the existence of numerous agencies for social betterment which have developed within and then outrun the church—schools, libraries, hospitals, free clinics, homes for orphan children, for foundlings, for the aged, asylums for the insane and the feeble minded, scout camps, the Y. M. C. A. and Y. W. C. A., foundations for medical research. A vast army of workers in and supporters of these organizations have, as their outcries increased, found less time for strictly church work. Insofar as this is true, there is no special cause for concern or regret, since the philanthropic urge is certainly expressing itself more intelligently and effectively than ever before.

Another cause, not to be lightly dismissed, is the decline of first class leadership in the church, among both clergy and laity. Our training schools for the recruiting of the ministry are mere shells of what they formerly were. Too few of our red-blooded youths of today are attracted to the ministry. Thus the pulpit has failed to attract the laity to the active participation in the work of the church. But there are even more discouraging conditions making against church progress. There is a good deal of suspicion that the church is not a leader in the cause of social justice; that it is dominated by the capitalist and the exploiter of human labor; that it is intentionally and wilfully keeping the people in ignorance in order that its grip on them may be stronger; that it deliberately preaches a false and misleading doctrine of submission to present day social evils in order that the poor may continue to be satisfied with their wretched lot on earth since no alternative is possible; and since in heaven all these social wrongs will be righted. And it cannot be denied that wealth has found ways of controlling many individual churches and that honors have been paid to many a pious scoundrel who has contributed to the church money which should have gone in increased wages to his help in the factory or behind the counter. As Heywood Broun puts it (The Nation, March 20, 1929), "Organized Christianity makes personal liberty impossible, mars education, and supports the utter brutali-
ties of our prison system."

Finally, the inelasticity of the creeds of the church repels many who have outgrown the old beliefs and who refuse to subscribe to dogmas which they have come to regard as false. Science, they say, makes it very clear that theologically there has never been a fall of man; that while it is possible for the individual to fall, the race has apparently been going steadily forward and upward—and if there has been no fall, what need of an atonement? If God and man have never drifted apart, what need of this elaborate machinery for reconciliation? I am not now presenting these as my personal views; I am merely reporting to you the views of an increasing number of thoughtful persons.

These last two causes, suspicion of the church's motives and discredit of the church's theology, chiefly account, it seems to me, for the apparent failure of the church to impress itself upon modern life. There are signs, however, that conditions are changing. Some of our leading denominations are fully awake to the necessity of reform in social conditions; and some of our ministers are speaking very plainly from their pulpits, without being thrown out. Education of the clergy as to the principles of social justice will do much to change the tone and direction of their sermons and their parochial and municipal activities. When labor leaders and welfare workers see what the church can do and is anxious to do for the amelioration of life among the toilers, they will be foolish indeed if they refuse to cooperate effectively. The great task of the church of today is to translate the Golden Rule into the dialect of the capitalist and the laborer.

But you will say, what about the creed? Must not the church have a creed? I do not see why. In the days when it was thought absolutely necessary to adopt a certain belief in order to become a member of the church, it was different. Now behold the church split up into hundreds of sects and there are most devout and noble Christians in every one of them. If unity of belief were essential how could this be? It is the duty of the
individual to arrive at some definite convictions on these as on other matters, holding his mind open so far as possible to the reception of new truth. But an elaborate creed is not a necessity for effective co-operation in church work. A group unified in the spirit of loyalty to the Founder of Christianity can get on very well without a further creed. It is the life that counts. If the Christian world could have perceived this a long time ago, the world might have been much farther along on its intellectual pathway, and a lot of noble martyrs might have died in their beds.

The church of the future, then, it seems to me, will be relatively a creedless church, laying stress on the cultivation of the spiritual life and treating with indifference the wealth of this world except as an instrument for human betterment. It will not cater to the wealthy; it will insist upon a condition of true democracy. It will regard an atmosphere of friendliness as of more importance than upholstered pews. It will find ways and means of bringing the gospel of hope and abundant life here on earth to those who need it most. It will lay stress on purity and nobility of life here on earth as the best training for whatever may be in store for us on the other side of the veil.

FINALLY a word about our international relations. A new conception of the brotherhood of man is spreading. The first of the new Ten Commandments of Social Justice promulgated by the federal council of churches runs thus: "I am the Lord thy God, but thou shalt remember that I am also the God of all the earth. I have no favorite children. The Negro and the Hindu, the Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Mexican are all my beloved children."

The ninth commandment turns out to be related:

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor by malicious propaganda or colored news, or by calling him contemptuous names such as Dago, Chink, Jap, Wop, Nigger, or Sheeny."

What are the causes of international dislike and distrust? This is not the time or place for a full discussion of these matters, but I want to lay stress on two: First, ignorance, and the distrust born of ignorance. This is markedly characteristic of primitive peoples. Even the Greeks were not free from it: they called foreigners 'barbaroi,' 'chatters' and declined to take the trouble to learn their languages or borrow anything from their cultures, with the one exception of Egypt. Secondly, the struggle for trade and for a field of investment or exploitation, which we now know lies at the bottom of imperialism. Commercial rivalry, it is now generally perceived, had much to do with precipitating the world war; and many students of international relations now believe that imperialism is one of the most fertile sources of war. It was certainly directly or indirectly at the bottom of most of the foreign wars in which we have become involved, the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War. And it is a condition which will bear watching. Why were the marines lately sent to Nicaragua? It has been answered by some, to defend the interests of American capital, money invested by private citizens, which should have been placed at their own risk. But through influence with the authorities they prevail upon the government to back them up with gunboats and marines. And thus arises friction, distrust, hatred, which may easily breed war.

The tendencies to which I have directed our attention, the threatened disruption of the home, our distrust of science, the dearth of good teachers, the decline of the influence of the church, economic rivalry, and imperialism are not likely, if checked in time, to result fatally. The good sense and the awakened intelligence of our people, we may well hope, will prevent our country from drifting into another international situation like that of 1914. It is still true that righteousness exalteth a nation. It is equally true and equally important that only through intelligence shall the soul of a nation be saved. * * * *

Tom Churchill

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In this, his junior year in the university, Tom's athletic record has been no less noteworthy than was the epic sophomore year. He made all Big Six end and all-Western end in football; all-Big Six forward in basketball and was high scorer in the conference, aided in the latter by his teammates, of course; and I noticed him given all-American basketball rating in some selection or other. This spring he was second in the septathlon in a Texas meet; successfully defended his Kansas Relay decathlon title, proving his courage there with a whirlwind finish to defeat the runner-up; and improved his Penn Relay decathlon rating to second.

If there is any criticism that Tom is an individualist, this might be an antidote: he has played on football teams in high school and college that won forty-two and lost but twelve games; and on basketball teams that won 102 and lost but nine. Teams on which he has played have won eight championships.

Just to conclude his athletic record, it is worth citing that he once set an Oklahoma City bowling championship, that he is an excellent tennis player, and that he even managed to beat the writer at golf—once.

So much for Tom Churchill's athletic record to date. He has another year in college. But to complete the story: he is six feet two inches tall, and weighs 193 pounds when in best condition, although lately a tendency to overweight has bothered him.

Tom is part English and Irish, and is one-sixteenth Cherokee, being one of very few athletes of Indian blood to represent America in the Olympics. The Indian blood hasn't helped him financially, either—he works his way through the university. And his grades are about average—which means that they would be higher if his time were not divided between study and athletics.

Tom will make a good captain of the basketball team next year and perhaps a captain of industry or business later on. He's no "dumb athlete."

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