

# THIS REVIVAL OF RELIGION

## INTRODUCTION

I'd like to talk to you this morning for a few minutes about this renewed interest in religion which has taken hold in our country over the past few years. It is a fact that more people are attending church today than ever before in our nation's history. More people belong a church, and more churches are being built. People are reading religious books. Oursler, Peale and Sheen have a very popular appeal. Eliot, Fry and Greene appeal to the more sophisticated. More people are talking about religion and discussing it in their homes, clubs, and colleges than ever before. Indeed, it is a fact that in the past five to ten years in our own country there has been a real revival of activity and interest in religion.

The question that is immediately raised is WHY. HOW do you account for it. I thought the 20th century American was completely immune to religion. Well, some people will say, pessimistically and often cynically, that it's because the people are scared, really scared i.e.. The threat of atomic warfare and total destruction has literally driven them into churches in much the same fashion that the blitz of London in 1940 drove the people of that city into the bomb shelters.

Personally I'm not convinced that this represents the complete answer. I don't think that the people of our country are that frightened. After all we're still getting along pretty well in spite of the dark clouds that are hanging over us, and sometimes I think that the danger of war is more academic than it is real. I should rather say, if I had to give a reason for this revival of religion, that people are more interested in religion than they once were because they are reaching for something that they do not have, and something which they apparently need. ~~Some of these things we shall consider together this morning.~~ I'd like to suggest <sup>three things</sup> that people are searching for in their religion. To be sure there are more, but for our purposes this morning, we'll consider three things, and after having done so, make some attempt to derive some conclusions from it all.

## SECURITY

If you were to ask me then what people are looking for in their religion more than anything else, I would suggest security. That's the first thing. Not social security mind you, because we have that already in this country, that is we have economic protection against unemployment and old age. People today are reaching out so it seems for an altogether different kind of security. They're reaching out for a security that they do not have, a security that will enable them to withstand every social and material insecurity. They know that the life we live is a precarious thing at best. It reminds me of the first line of a book review that appeared in the NY Times a few weeks ago. It started out by saying: "To be alive is to be in peril". I think people realize that. They know that there is no security against disease, disaster, and ultimately death. What they want and what they're looking for is a security that will enable them to withstand these temporal insecurities. They want, for instance, the kind of security that Job had when he wrote: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him." They long for the kind of security that Paul had when he said: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me". It's a kind of security you see that money cannot buy, nor the world shake.

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### MEANING

A second thing that people are reaching for is meaning - a meaning for their own existence, a meaning for their own lives. They're looking for a place in life that counts, a task that makes a difference whether you do or not. It takes us back to the man that I spoke of several weeks ago - the man who runs the shuttle train between Grand Central Station and Times Square. What meaning is there in life for such a person. All he does is travel back and forth between Times Square and Grand Central Station, hour after hour, day after day. It's true that the industrialization of life has created a great many benefits for all of us and we dare not minimize them, but the industrialization of life has made many lives rather insignificant in terms of function.

Think of the man who has had his own market all of his life. Here perhaps I can weave in a bit of my own personal experience. We do most of our grocery shopping at a super-market over on York Avenue. There use to be a man working in the vegetable department whose name was Tony - Tony Como (No relation to Perry, mind you). In the period of time that he worked there we got to know Tony pretty well. Tony once told me how he at one time had had his own little grocery shop up in the Bronx, and how a super-market moved into the neighborhood thus forcing him out of business. Tony was the type of man, I imagine, who put all of his imagination and personality into his business. I imagine that he got to know all of his clients - their tastes, and their distastes, and the customers got to know him. Well, after he was forced out of business, he went to work for the super-market, where in a very real sense, he was just one man carrying out the mechanical details of a massive industry in which he, personally, was not very important. If he dropped out, someone else could do the same thing, and noone would know the difference.

This sort of thing affects people. There are some of us who are fortunate enough not to be affected by it, people who are lawyers, and doctors, nurses and teachers. Such people have a sense of function and meaning in their lives, but even in a group like this, I would imagine that there are people who are reaching out around them to find meaning for their lives, but in their work there is little or none.

A story is told about how when the work was begun on the Cathedral of St. John the Divine here in New York a good many years ago, someone approached three men who were stone cutters and asked each one of them what he was doing. "The first one said, "I'm earning twelve dollars a day". The second one said, "I'm cutting a stone for the west bay". The third one said, "I'm building a cathedral". People are reaching out for something like that. They want to be part of something big enough to lift them up and give meaning to their lives, but no so big that it swallows them up and they lose their personal identity. And they wonder if they might not find something like that in the Christian Church where people are still known by name, and not by an IBM card or number.

### LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

Turning now to a third thing that people are looking for in their religion, we find that a great many of them are looking for answers to some of life's deeper questions. There was a time, and not too long ago, when people that we had all of the answers. Some thought science had all the answers. Others thought that perhaps the League of Nations would provide us with

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the answers. Some thought that economic theory would give us the answers. But people are beginning to realize that science, politics, and economics cannot provide us with answers in the deeper areas of life. I suppose some of us would be better off if our minds were not quite so active, and we did not ask so many questions. But we do, and as long as we are human we will continue to ask questions, and be tormented by a kind of curiosity that will not let us rest.

What is life all about? Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? How can I manage the tempestuous life that goes on within me? People are turning to their religious faith to have these questions answered. And the answers that come are not based on logic. They are the kind of answers that come from what you might call an intuitive grasp and understanding of life. Answers like these (and they will not satisfy everyone) (but they're the sort of answer the church has) You want to know who you are? In the highest sense, you are a child of God. You ask why you are here? You are here to do his will which we find is done by trying to live the kind of life Jesus lived. You want to know where you are going? You are going on and on into a life that is deeper, richer and fuller. You want to know what it is all about? Loving, giving, suffering - this is the fulfillment of life. These are some of the answers.

So many people today seem to be reaching for things they do not have. They know that there is something missing in their lives. They have all that money can buy, and still they are lacking in something. They're not sure what it is, nor where they can find it. But as you talk to people on levels below the surface of ordinary conversation, you come to realize to what an extent they're reaching and searching. I think some words spoken by the late Dr. Karl Compton, at one time president of MIT, are significant at this point. Dr. Compton, a few years back, was being questioned as to why MIT was building a chapel of all things, and an auditorium, and a large library, and even contemplating the possibility of appointing a full professor of religion and ethics. In answer to these questions, he said:

"When I was elected president of MIT twenty years ago I was told that my job was to make MIT the best scientific school that I knew how to make it, and I tried to do it. The task of our present president is quite different from that. His job is to give the men who come to MIT the best education that we can give them, and we all know that science by itself cannot do it."

Words from a man of science that express the truth that something has been left out of life, out of school, out of the home, and that life will never be full and rich and normal until that something has once again been supplied. And how many mother and fathers in our country today who could say the same thing about their homes. Their job, as they well knew, was to make the best home they knew how, and money and success, and pleasure and education in the best schools and colleges have not been quite enough.

CONCLUSIONS Security, meaning, answers to life's deeper questions - these then are just three of the things that people have been attempting to find in this recent religious revival.

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Suppose we now spend the remaining minutes in arriving at some conclusions.

The first has to do with the church in general. It is simply this. I think that the church has an unprecedented opportunity and a unique responsibility at this very time. All of this recent interest in religion raises questions that the church must be willing to face. I'm not going to answer these questions, but simply state some of them. Is the church prepared to meet this opportunity? What ought the church to be saying to those who are coming to it, reaching for these things that they want. Will the church be brave enough and bold enough to tell the people that this way is a narrow way. Will the church have the courage to resist the temptation to be the voice of America, or the voice of some particular group of people who feel a particular way about a social issue instead of being the voice of God? Will the church be alive enough to lead people into a real security that rests not on anything that money can buy, but on the things that belong to God. Will the church see to it that this revival is more than something that is skin deep, but soul deep? It's a terrible responsibility you see that is facing the church in this time, and the answers to all of these questions depend ~~upon~~ to a great extent upon those whose dedications are as complete as though they themselves had been ordained priest or minister.

Generally speaking this concerns all of you individually. The other conclusion that I would make concerns all of us even more. Religion is one of the necessities of life. A person can do without religion for a time. He can get along pretty well without it for a while, but sooner or later, he will have to come up for air. In the long run, as a people and as individuals, you come to the place where you realize that you are short of the things that you need in order to live, that you have taken meticulous care of one side of your life and completely neglected the other. The cupboard is bare. There is in all of us, even in the hard-fisted person who boasts that he is not very religious, something comparable to what the Psalmist said when he wrote: "My heart is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God". In other words, there is in all of us, sometimes inarticulate and sometimes buried under a thousand trivial and transient things, a real thirst for meaning and purpose, for a relationship that will satisfy the deepest things in us, and a companionship that will enlarge and expand our lives beyond their normal proportion.

And so to bring all of this to a point, the lesson that we can learn and ought to learn now is that the thirst for God cannot be satisfied by Coca-cola, or by any of the other artificial things that men have tried to put in its place. The thirst for security, for meaning, for the answers to all of life's greatest questions - the very thirst for God himself will be satisfied and quenched only when a person in his need turns to God and puts himself in such a position of exposure that God's life to some slight degree can flow into his life and enlarge it, and enrich it, and make it full!

LET US PRAY: Our Father and our God - thou who hast put a restlessness in our hearts and a thirst for thee in our very nature, turn us now in the right direction. Help us to realize that there are no easy answers to our questions, and no short cuts to greater spiritual reality. Help us to search our own lives to see whether our dedication to thee is skin deep or ~~only~~ soul deep. In thy name we pray. Amen

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## CONCLUSIONS

Security - meaning - and answers to life's deeper questions. These then are the three things that people are reaching for and searching for in their religious experience. Suppose now we spend the remaining minutes thinking about some of the conclusions that all of this brings forth.

The FIRST has to do with the CHURCH in general. It's simply this. I think that the church has a unique responsibility and an unprecedented opportunity at this very time. This revival of religion raises some interesting questions that the churches ought to be facing. I'm not going to answer these questions, but simply state them: (1) Is the church prepared to meet this opportunity? (2) What ought the church to be saying to those who are coming to it, reaching and searching for the things they want? (3) Is the message of the church coherent with the best in science, psychology and sociology (4) Will the church be brave enough and bold enough to tell the people that "this way is a narrow way? (5) Will the church be strong enough to resist the temptation to be the voice of America, or the voice of some particular group in America that feels a certain way about a social issue. (6) Will the church be alive enough to lead people into a real security that rests not on the things that money can buy, but upon the things that belong to God? (7) Will the church be alive enough to make this religious revival a real spiritual awakening, something that's soul deep and not just skin deep? You see it's a terrible responsibility that the church is faced with today, and the answers to all of these questions depend to a very great extent upon those sitting in the pews as well as those standing in the pulpits, upon those whose dedications are as complete as though they themselves had been ordained priest, prophet or minister.

The SECOND conclusion that I would make concerns us all even more. Religion, I feel, is one of the necessities of life. A person can do without it for a long time and get along pretty well, but sooner or later he has to come up for air. In the long run, a person can easily come to the place where he realizes that he is short of the things that he needs in order to really live, and that he has taken meticulous care of one side of his life, and completely neglected the other side. The cupboard is bare. There's nothing there when you need it. There is in all of us, even in the hard fisted person who boasts that he's not very religious, something comparable to what the Psalmist said when he wrote: "My heart is athirst for God, yea even for the living God". In other words, there is in all of us, sometimes inarticulate and sometimes buried under a thousand trivial and transient things, a real thirst for purpose and meaning, for a relationship that will satisfy the deepest things in us, and a companionship that will enlarge and expand our lives beyond their normal proportion.

And so to bring all of this to a point, the less that we can learn and ought to learn now is that the thirst for God cannot be satisfied by Coca-cola, or by any of the other artificial things that men have tried to put in its place. The thirst for security - for meaning - for answers ----the very thirst for God himself will be satisfied only when a person in his need turns to God and puts himself in such a position of exposure that God's life to some slight degree can flow into his life and enlarge it, and enrich it, and make it full.

PRAYER: Our Father and our God, thou hast put a restlessness in our hearts and a thirst for thee in our very nature, turn us now in the

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right direction. Help us to realize that there are no easy answers to the great questions of life, and no short cuts to greater spiritual reality. Help us too - to search our own lives to see whether our dedication to Thee and to thy church is skin deep or soul deep. Amen

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O spirit of the Living God

Thou light and fire divine

Descend upon thy church onee  
more

And make it truly thine!

Fill it with joy and love and  
power

With righteousness and peace -

Till Christ shall dwell in  
human hearts, and sin  
and sorrow cease!