

The Advanced Guard of the Human Race

It is staggering to the imagination to consider that within the coming decades men~~a~~ will be <sup>working</sup> ~~talking~~ seriously <sup>toward</sup> ~~about~~ setting foot on other planets. Already scientists <sup>are</sup> sending up rockets in an attempt to traverse ~~the~~ interstellar space. Under the excitement of these imaginings I have often thought about the first handful of human beings who may one day land millions of miles away on the surface of another planet. Now there comes the report of some speculations of A British scientist by the name of Stapledon who imagines the possibility of making other planets inhabitable by the use of atomic energy. The New York Times reports him thus: "Astrophysicists agree that the only planets in the solar system that may sustain the kind of life that we know are Mars, which is very cold and arid, and Venus which is probably very hot and humid. Given atomic power, Stapledon sees no reason why terrestrial man should not increase the thin atmosphere of Mars and the water supply, irrigate the Martian deserts, even raise the surface temperature. At the worst ' Mars might be used as an extraterrestrial Siberia in which to exile all our really tiresome people' at the risk of depopulating the earth, Stapledon quipped. Similarly the moon might be converted into a human habitation. Since it has no atmosphere one would have to be provided. . . .The atmosphere of Venus would also have to be altered. Water would have to be created on an enormous scale, vegetation cultivated for the sole purpose of supplying oxygen. In spite of the perpetual struggle to maintain the right living conditions, he thinks that Venus might in time rival and surpass the earth as a home for intelligent beings.

All of this may sound utterly fantastic but it is indicative of human imagination that is as yet ~~undefeated~~.undefeated. Rather than being greatly thrilled with anticipation in the fact of all of this,



some people shudder ~~with~~ apprehension. Several weeks ago the Christian Century had an editorial entitled "Have We Gone Mad?" in which it took a gloomy and fearful look at all of the new machines with which man is preparing to leap out into space. The editorial even expressed the hope that some of these inventions could be checked. A few weeks later one of the paper's readers wrote a letter in which the belief was expressed that newer and more fiendish inventions could not be held in check. The letter added:

From a practical standpoint it adds up to this: Some group of scientists will find a way to enter space. What man does there will be determined by his character after he gets there. If men with Christian background are the first to reach this goal, there is hope. If those with pagan ideas reach it first, there is little hope. (March 2, 1949)

This letter recalled to my mind a passage in a little book by Howard Thurman called THE APOSTLES OF SENSITIVENESS:

When Christianity makes central in its doctrine the redemptive significance of the cross, it defines itself ever in terms of the growing edge, the advanced guard of the human race who take the lead in Man's long march to the City of God. (p.35)

Surely the men ~~who~~/~~will~~/~~be~~/ of the future who hurl through space with blinding speed in the quest for other planets will be men of whom it could be said that they were an advanced guard of the human race. In the years to come some men may dream of establishing the City of God on another planet. But in any event they will carry the banner of the human race. We know enough now of the terrible forces and power upon which they will wing their flight to realize that the most crucial consideration will be their characters as men. The writer of that letter gives us something to think about.: they had better be Christian. For if we can trust the words of Dr. Thurman real Christians are always the true Advance Guard of the Human Race. That idea ought to sink in upon our consciousness this morning as we consider the real mission of Christian believers. Let us see what that means.

For one thing, being in the Advanced Guard gives the Christian the right, I believe, to feel that he marches with a superior company. This is a proud feeling which, to be sure, must be seen in its limitations and controlled by reason and the purpose of Christ. Nonetheless, he has every reason to feel that he is committed to a superior mission on earth. Being Christ-like he will never try to lord his superiority over others, but he knows the joy of an assured superiority. The point is, of course, that he is superior <sup>to those</sup> who have no Christlike orientation and who have no sense of participation in a divine purpose.

Christians are daringly advanced persons who having recognized their human weaknesses and limitations, yea, their sins, have managed to gain a measure of control and discipline by fighting through to victory. The victory is over self. It has been achieved by devotion to the purpose and person of Christ. Christians thus liberated from selfishness are definitely among the advanced guard of the human race because they have achieved that measure of power upon which alone the human race may go forward.

The greatest historian of our day, Arnold Toynbee, has said: "The principal preoccupation of man until now has been the domination of his universe. In the future he will have to learn to dominate himself. To accomplish this he will have to conquer not only his lower instincts, but the habits created by the rapid progress of the mechanical arts." (COT, 137)

If we look back far enough into the dim beginnings of history we would certainly classify as among the vanguard of the human race those few individuals who managed to transcend the life of the jungle and to come out upon a new plane and open up the new vista of human life. They did this by conquering the wild and violent passions of the jungle man.



We moderns are as yet unable to appreciate the significance of those individuals in ancient history who triumphed in this achievement. Five thousand and three hundred years ago this letter of counsel was written to a husband, a head of the house. It is from one of the most ancient books in the world:

If thou art wise, thou wilt take care of thine own house. Thou wilt cherish thy wife, thou wilt nourish her, thou wilt clothe her, and thou wilt nurse her if she is ill. Fill her heart with joy during her whole life and be not severe . . . Be good to thy servants within the possibility of thy means. Peace and happiness are absent from the house in which the servants are unhappy. (Toynbee COT, 129, 130)

That is significant because it marks a leap of moral improvement in the human race.

We as Christians are therefore challenged to ~~stand~~ move ahead with the advanced guard of the human race. All of our wise men are telling us that future life of this planet is most directly conditioned upon the improvement of human character. And this ought to be said: the man who has to ~~str~~ struggle most fiercely in the conquest of himself is really a greater hero whose place is properly in the advanced guard. For the men who march farther and longer, the men who make the greatest conquests for the human race are usually they whose power is derived from the victorious battle over themselves. The harder they fight, the greater they are - if they win. This is the story of Augustine, St. Francis, Gandhi. *Hence the right to travel in a superior company.*

-II-

For another thing, the Christian in the advanced guard discovers that his superiority is both expressed and increased by his participation in the Christian Church. This is because the Christian Church ought to be the advanced guard of the entire human race.

We hear a good deal about the church being a ~~slow~~ slow moving force, indeed a drag upon human progress. There have been definite advances in human society that have been made ~~in~~ in spite of the church rather than ~~because~~ because of it. That fact we must face.

So cial philosophers have pointed out that one of the most fateful periolds in modern European history occurred ~~when~~ during the 19th century ~~when~~ the industrial order was taking shape <sup>and</sup> the working classes of most countries came to believe ~~that~~ sincerely that the churches were against them. Jacques Maritain, a Roman Catholic philosopher, has pointed this out:

What is the cause of this (atheism of ~~the~~/Communism)? It is, I hold, because it originates, chiefly through the fault of a Christian world unfaithful to its own principles, in a profound sense of resentment, not only against the Christian world, but - and here lies the tragedy - against Christianity itself. (John C. Bennett in CHRISTIANITY AND COMMUNISM, p.48)

This regretable fact was pointed out time and time again at the great meeting of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam last August. Here are some of the excerpts: "The church has left the care and the protection of man to others. In the intellectual sphere the Church has left the protection of man to science and philosophy; in the economic and social sphere it has left his protection to socialism . . . The Church has left to others the responsibility for revolution . . . The Church has left to others the responsibility for the spiritual life of the peoples . . . it has restricted its work almost exclusively to individual witness and private conversion, and has left the nations of Europe to seek their spiritual food elsewhere; the state ~~the~~ with its myths gave them what they required." (AMSTERDAM SERIES, III, p 59,60)

But actually the real business of the Christian Church, if it were truly the advanced guard of the human race, would be revolution - revolutionizing the world for Christ. Make no mistake about it; that would be revolutionary! The business of the church has to do with the moral and spiritual conditions of human life. Joseph Thompson, the first preacher of the great Broadway Tabernacle in New York City, once described what a preacher ought to be: "He is the first to see,

the first to feel, and the first to move against all ~~from~~ forms of moral evil". ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ That ought also to describe the dynamic power of the Church. But the simple truth is that the Church has not always been the first to see, the first to feel, and the first to move against all wrongs. Other secular and non-Christian groups have often constituted or usurped our place as the Advanced Guard of the human race.

Roger W. Babson has told of a visit he once paid to the president of the Argentine Republic. They ~~xxx~~ sat in a sun parlor, overlooking the river. The president spoke: "Mr. Babson, I have been wondering why it is that South America is so far behind North America, despite the fact that South America was settled before North America. The president went on to tell how the forests of South America had 286 trees which could be found in no book of botany. He spoke of the many ranches that had thousands of acres of alfalfa in one block. He mentioned the mines of iron, coal, copper, silver, gold of that continent. He pointed out that South America's great rivers possessed water power to rival Niagara. With all this as a prelude, the president ~~asked~~ asked: "Why is it that, with all these natural resources, South America is ~~so~~ far behind North America?" Mr. Babson knew the answer but he waited for it to come from the president. It was not long in coming. "I have come to this conclusion," the president said: "South America was settled by the Spanish who came in search for ~~gold~~ gold; but North America was settled by the Pilgrim Fathers who went there in search of God." (THE PULPIT, April, 1948, p. 74) They were the ~~real~~ real advanced guard of the human ~~at~~ race, and whenever the church loses that purpose it loses its position as the vanguard of humankind. And its concern is always for the welfare of human life.

-III-

Perhaps when we consider the final requirement necessary to be among the advanced guard we will ~~demur~~ demur. The advanced guard must



be willing to pay the price. Its courage must be dauntless as it faces into the heavy fire and conflict of new conquests.

There are so many of us right here who are conventional Christians that we ought to pause and consider our place in the Christian movement. Are we among the advanced guard, or do we recline indifferently far to the rear? So many of us have come to terms with the gospel of Christ without ever surrendering to its demands. To move in among the advancing guard is to drop this sluggish conventionality and put on the armor of daring and courage, ready to pay the price of leading.

To do this would be, first of all, to enter into the experience of guilt with all human kind. That costs something. As Reinhold Niebhuhr has said, "The measure of our creative relation to the perplexities of our time depends upon the knowledge of our own involvement in the guilt of the nations." (AMSTERDAM SERIES III, 25)

Therefore to be a Christian in this sense is no easy, effortless, and task. There is no assurance of safety. For he who marched even before the advanced guard, leading the way in the upward march of humanity, was crucified upon a cross.

There are many young people in this congregation this morning. I wish that I could cause them to want to become apart of that company of believers ~~who leads~~ which leads this ascendant march. I wish that I could make their lives ring with the challenge to become a part of that advanced guard which, having made the conquest over self, is not afraid to pioneer in moral and spiritual leadership. If you are to be a teacher in a backwoods school; if you are to be a coach of boys in any town; if you are to be a lawyer or an engineer or a pharmacist or a man of business power, or just a wife and a mother, you can dedicate your life to the improvement of the capacities of the human race. If you daily let your mind be stayed on Christ and his will and purpose you can march at the very head of the human struggle.

How much has happened within my own brief life. How well I remember as a boy of eight years when a daring young man lifted a tiny silver plane into the sky and headed for the open seas and the rimless sky. I can recall as though it were yesterday the chorus of praise that greeted that young man from ~~NY~~ around the world when some thirty hours later he fluttered down out of the skies in Paris to be hailed as the first human ever to make a non-stop flight across the Atlantic ocean alone. I grew up as a boy under the spell of that young man's heroism. I followed his course as he was saluted and feted by kings and ~~queens~~ all over the world. He was indeed a fearless leader in that great vanguard which has gone on to conquer time and space by flying across the skies. But growing up under that experience was not to be compared to the thrill I received last fall, when I picked up a little book by that same young man, Charles A. Lindbergh, called OF FLIGHT AND LIFE, to read from his own pen the story of the spiritual struggle and growth that have occurred in him;

To me in youth, science was more important than either man or God. The one I took for granted; the other was too intangible for me to understand. The basic relationships of men were hidden by American prosperity and the froth of party politics. The ever present truths of God were veiled by dogma and convention. Science alone was tangible and clear.

Its shining promises were as blinding to higher ~~dogma~~ human values as to its own dangers. . . . . Now I realize that while God cannot be seen as tangibly as I had ~~demanded~~ demanded as a child, His presence can be ~~sense~~ in every sight and act and incident. I know that when man loses this sense, he misses the true quality of life - the beauty of the earth, its seasons and its skies; the brotherhood of men; the joy of wife and children. . . . I now understand that spiritual truth is more essential to a nation than the mortar ~~in~~ in its cities' walls.

There is the evidence of a man who has twice been among the advanced guard of the human race. I wish that all of us who have taken here today the trouble to worship the living God could join in that vanguard, whose spirit is faith in God accompanied and efforedd by the courage of Christ. If we could be numbered among that company look to those



with whom we march \* Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Sameul, J~~é~~s~~u~~s, Peter, James, John, and Paul, all of whom have been more than conquerors through Christ; who th~~h~~rough faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mockings and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill treated - of whom the world was not worthy - wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. All of this because they were men of faith, the advanced guard of the human race"who looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God".